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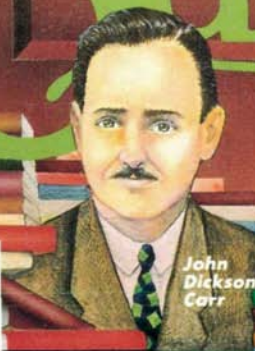
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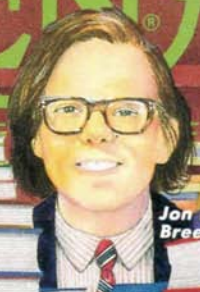
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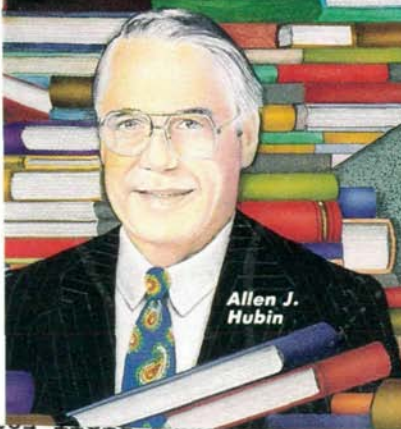
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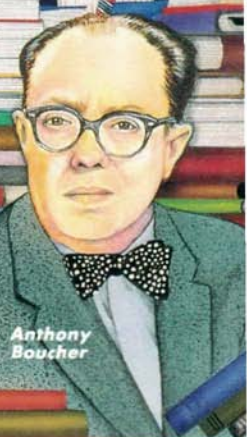
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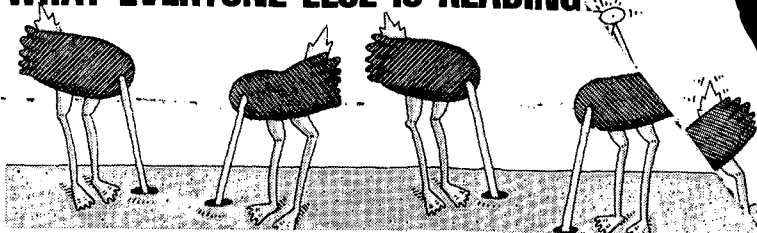
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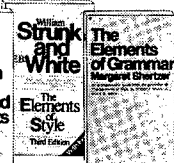
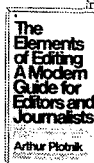
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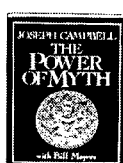
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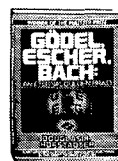


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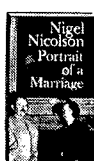
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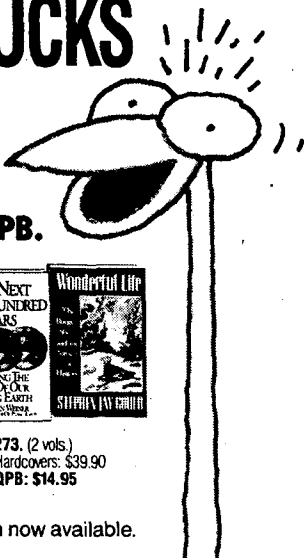


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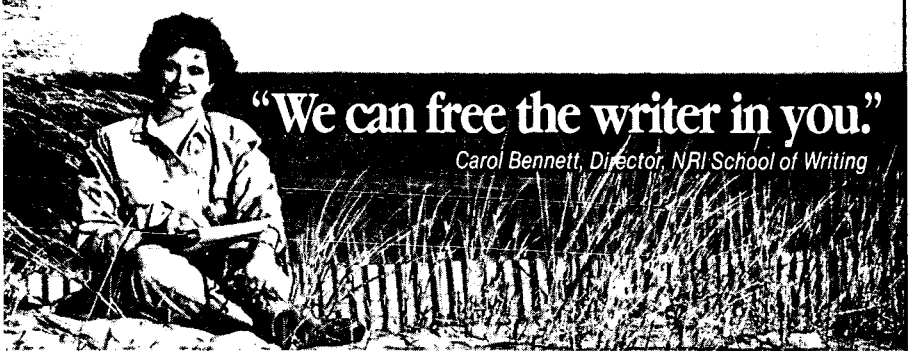
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**ISSUE #583—DEDICATED TO MESSRS. BOUCHER, BREEN,
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Through most of our fifty years, EQMM has been served royally by the most esteemed critics in the mystery genre. Starting with Howard Haycraft (seen with Frederic Dannay below), who wrote ten columns—Speaking of Crime: “A Department of Comment and Criticism”—between February 1946 and October 1948, the mystery has been subsequently reviewed here by Anthony Boucher (see page 124 for notice of the 1991 Bouchercon in his memory and page 40 for a story of his written as by H. H. Holmes), John Dickson Carr, who initiated the title “The Jury Box” with his May 1970 column (see page 52 for his Ellery Queen Contest-winning story for 1949), Allen J. Hubin (who also reviewed mysteries for *The New York Times Book Review* and founded *The Armchair Detective*), and present reviewer Jon L. Breen, whose fiction also appears on pages 32–39.

There is much in EQMM’s fifty-year history that honors those of us associated with the magazine, but nothing more so than the caliber of judgment these five discriminating men brought to these pages, adding immeasurably to its lasting international reputation.



Howard Haycraft with Frederic Dannay (Hollander Photographic)

a **NEW** short story by

PETER LOVESEY

No one could doubt that the Brown sisters lived an orderly existence; there were no complaints about undue noise or unwashed windows or neglected paintwork. The hedge was trimmed and the garden mown. But what really bubbled and boiled behind the regularly washed net curtains—the secret passion that was to have such a dire result—was unsuspected until Oyster committed her crime.

Peter Lovesey is one of the delightful writers in our genre who is equally proficient at short fiction and at the novel length . . .

THE CRIME OF MISS OYSTER BROWN

by **PETER LOVESEY**

Miss Oyster Brown, a devout member of the Church of England, joined passionately each Sunday in every prayer of the Morning Service—except for the general Confession, when, in all honesty, she found it difficult to class herself as a lost sheep. She was willing to believe that everyone else in church had erred and strayed. In certain cases she knew exactly how, and with whom, and she would say a prayer for them. On her own account, however, she could seldom think of anything to confess. She tried strenuously, more strenuously—dare I say it?—than you or me to lead an untainted life. She managed conspicuously well. Very occasionally, as the rest of congregation joined in the Confession, she would own up to some trifling sin.

You may imagine what a fall from grace it was when this virtuous

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woman committed not merely a sin, but a crime. She lived more than half her life before it happened.

She resided in a Berkshire town with her twin sister Pearl, who was a mere three minutes her senior. Oyster and Pearl—a flamboyance in forenames that owed something to the fact that their parents had been plain John and Mary Brown. Up to the moment of birth the Browns had been led to expect one child, who, if female, was to be named Pearl. In the turmoil created by a second, unscheduled, daughter, John Brown jokingly suggested naming her Oyster. Mary, bosky from morphine, seized on the name as an inspiration, a delight to the ear when said in front of dreary old Brown.

Of course the charm was never so apparent to the twins, who got to dread being introduced to people. Even in infancy, they were aware that their parents' friends found the names amusing. At school they were taunted as much by the teachers as the children. The names never ceased to amuse. Fifty years on, things were still said just out of earshot and laced with pretended sympathy. "Here come Pearl and Oyster, poor old ducks. Fancy being stuck with names like that."

No wonder they faced the world defiantly. In middle age, they were a formidable duo, stalwarts of the choir, the Bible-reading Circle, the Townswomen's Guild, and the Magistrates' Bench. Neither sister had married. They lived together in Lime Tree Avenue, in the mock-Tudor house where they were born. They were not short of money.

There are certain things people always want to know about twins, the more so in mystery stories. I can reassure the wary reader that Oyster and Pearl were not identical. Oyster was an inch taller, more sturdy in build than her sister and slower of speech. They dressed individually, Oyster as a rule in tweed skirts and check blouses that she made herself, always from the same Butterick pattern; Pearl in a variety of mail-order suits in pastel blues and greens. No one confused them.

As for that other question so often asked about twins, neither sister could be characterized as "dominant." Each possessed a forceful personality by any standard. To avoid disputes they had established a household routine, a division of the duties that worked pretty harmoniously, all things considered. Oyster did most of the cooking and the gardening, for example, and Pearl attended to the housework and paid the bills when they became due. They both enjoyed shopping, so they shared it. They did the church flowers

together when their turn came, and they always ran the bottle stall at the church fete. Five vicars had held the living at St. Saviour's in the twins' time as worshipers there. Each new incumbent was advised by his predecessor that Pearl and Oyster were the mainstays of the parish. Better to fall foul of the diocesan bishop himself than the Brown twins.

All of this was observed from a distance, for no one, not even a vicar making his social rounds, was allowed inside the house in Lime Tree Avenue. The twins didn't entertain, and that was final. They were polite to their neighbors without once inviting them in. When one twin was ill, the other would transport her to the surgery in a state of high fever rather than call the doctor on a visit.

It followed that people's knowledge of Pearl and Oyster was limited. No one could doubt that they lived an orderly existence; there were no complaints about undue noise or unwashed windows or neglected paintwork. The hedge was trimmed and the garden mown. But what really bubbled and boiled behind the regularly washed net curtains—the secret passion that was to have such a dire result—was unsuspected until Oyster committed her crime.

She acted out of desperation. On the last Saturday in July, 1990, her well ordered life suffered a seismic shock. She was parted from her twin sister. The parting was sudden, traumatic, and had to be shrouded in secrecy. The prospect of anyone finding out what had occurred was unthinkable.

So for the first time in her life Oyster had no Pearl to change the light bulbs, pay the bills, and check that all the doors were locked. Oyster—let it be understood—was not incapable or dim-witted. Bereft as she was, she managed tolerably well until the Friday afternoon, when she had a letter to post, a letter of surpassing importance, capable—God willing—of easing her desolation. She had agonized over it for hours. Now it was crucial that the letter caught the last post of the day. Saturday would be too late. She went to the drawer where Pearl always kept the postage stamps and—calamity—not one was left.

Stamps had always been Pearl's responsibility. To be fair, the error was Oyster's; she had written more letters than usual and gone through the supply. She should have called at the Post Office when she was doing the shopping.

It was too late. There wasn't time to get there before the last post at 5:15. She tried to remain calm and consider her options. It was

out of the question to ask a neighbor for a stamp; she and Pearl had made it a point of honor never to be beholden to anyone else. Neither could she countenance the disgrace of despatching the letter without a stamp in the hope that it would get by, or the recipient would pay the amount due.

This left one remedy, and it was criminal.

Behind one of the Staffordshire dogs on the mantelpiece was a bank statement. She had put it there for the time being because she had been too busy to check where Pearl normally stored such things. The significant point for Oyster at this minute was not the statement, but the envelope containing it. More precisely, the top right-hand corner of the envelope, because the first-class stamp had somehow escaped being cancelled.

Temptation stirred and uncoiled itself.

Oyster had never in her life steamed an unfranked stamp from an envelope and used it again. Nor, to her knowledge, had Pearl. Stamp collectors sometimes removed used specimens for their collections, but what Oyster was contemplating could in no way be confused with philately. It was against the law. Defrauding the Post Office. A crime.

There was under twenty minutes before the last collection.

I couldn't, she told herself. I'm on the Parochial Church Council. I'm on the Bench.

Temptation reminded her that she was due for a cup of tea in any case. She filled the kettle and pressed the switch. While waiting, watching the first wisp of steam rise from the spout, she weighed the necessity of posting the letter against the wickedness of reusing a stamp. It wasn't the most heinous of crimes, Temptation whispered. And once Oyster began to think about the chances of getting away with it, she was lost. The kettle sang, the steam gushed, and she snatched up the envelope and jammed it against the spout. Merely, Temptation reassured her, to satisfy her curiosity as to whether stamps could be separated from envelopes by this method.

Those who believe in retribution will not be in the least surprised that the steam was deflected by the surface of the envelope and scalded three of Oyster's fingers quite severely. She cried out in pain and dropped the envelope. She ran the cold tap and plunged her hand under it. Then she wrapped the sore fingers in a piece of kitchen towel.

Her first action after that was to turn off the kettle. Her second was to pick up the envelope and test the corner of the stamp with

the tip of her fingernail. It still adhered to some extent, but with extreme care she was able to ease it free, consoled that her discomfort had not been entirely without result. The minor accident failed to deter her from the crime. On the contrary, it acted like a prod from Old Nick.

There was a bottle of gum in the writing desk and she applied some to the back of the stamp, taking care not to use too much, which might have oozed out at the edges and discolored the envelope. When she had positioned the stamp neatly on her letter, it would have passed the most rigorous inspection. She felt a wicked frisson of satisfaction at having committed an undetectable crime. Just in time, she remembered the post and had to hurry to catch it.

There we leave Miss Oyster Brown to come to terms with her conscience for a couple of days.

We meet her again on the Monday morning in the local chemist's shop. The owner and pharmacist was John Trigger, whom the Brown twins had known for getting on for thirty years, a decent, obliging man with a huge moustache who took a personal interest in his customers. In the face of strong competition from a national chain of pharmacists, John Trigger had persevered with his old-fashioned service from behind a counter, believing that some customers still preferred it to filling a wire basket themselves. But to stay in business, he had been forced to diversify by offering some electrical goods.

When Oyster Brown came in and showed him three badly scalded fingers out in blisters, Trigger was sympathetic as well as willing to suggest a remedy. Understandably, he inquired how Oyster had come by such a painful injury. She was expecting the question and had her answer ready, adhering to the truth as closely as a God-fearing woman should.

"An accident with the kettle."

Trigger looked genuinely alarmed. "An electric kettle? Not the one you bought here last year?"

"I didn't," said Oyster at once.

"Must have been your sister. A Steamquick. Is that what you've got?"

"Er, yes."

"If there's a fault—"

"I'm not here to complain, Mr. Trigger. So you think this ointment will do the trick?"

"I'm sure of it. Apply it evenly, and don't attempt to pierce the blisters, will you?" John Trigger's conscience was troubling him. "This is quite a nasty scalding, Miss Brown. Where exactly did the steam come from?"

"The kettle."

"I know that. I mean was it the spout?"

"It really doesn't matter," said Oyster sharply. "It's done."

"The lid, then? Sometimes if you're holding the handle you get a rush of steam from that little slot in the lid. I expect it was that."

"I couldn't say," Oyster fudged, in the hope that it would satisfy Mr. Trigger.

It did not. "The reason I asked is that there may be a design fault."

"The fault was mine, I'm quite sure."

"Perhaps I ought to mention it to the manufacturers."

"Absolutely not," Oyster said in alarm. "I was careless, that's all. And now, if you'll excuse me—" She started backing away and then Mr. Trigger ambushed her with another question.

"What does your sister say about it?"

"My sister?" From the way she spoke, she might never have had one.

"Miss Pearl."

"Oh, nothing. We haven't discussed it," Oyster truthfully stated.

"But she must have noticed your fingers."

"Er, no. How much is the ointment?"

Trigger told her and she dropped the money on the counter and almost rushed from the shop. He stared after her, bewildered.

The next time Oyster Brown was passing, Trigger took the trouble to go to the door of his shop and inquire whether the hand was any better. Clearly she wasn't overjoyed to see him. She assured him without much gratitude that the ointment was working. "It was nothing. It's going to clear up in a couple of days."

"May I see?"

She held out her hand.

Trigger agreed that it was definitely on the mend. "Keep it dry, if you possibly can. Who does the washing up?"

"What do you mean?"

"You or your sister? It's well known that you divide the chores between you. If it's your job, I'm sure Miss Pearl won't mind taking over for a few days. If I see her, I'll suggest it myself."

Oyster reddened and said nothing.

"I was going to remark that I haven't seen her for a week or so," Trigger went on. "She isn't unwell, I hope?"

"No," said Oyster. "Not unwell."

Sensing correctly that this was not an avenue of conversation to venture along at this time, he said instead, "The Steamquick rep was in yesterday afternoon, so I mentioned what happened with your kettle."

She was outraged. "You had no business!"

"Pardon me, Miss Brown, but it *is* my business. You were badly scalded. I can't have my customers being injured by the products I sell. The rep was very concerned, as I am. He asked if you would be so good as to bring the kettle in next time you come so that he can check if there's a fault."

"Absolutely not," said Oyster. "I told you I haven't the slightest intention of complaining."

Trigger tried to be reasonable. "It isn't just your kettle. I've sold the same model to other customers."

"Then they'll complain if they get hurt."

"What if their children get hurt?"

She had no answer.

"If it's inconvenient to bring it in, perhaps I could call at your house."

"No," she said at once.

"I can bring a replacement. In fact, Miss Brown, I'm more than a little concerned about this whole episode. I'd like you to have another kettle with my compliments. A different model. Frankly, the modern trend is for jug kettles that couldn't possibly scald you as yours did. If you'll kindly step into the shop, I'll give you one now to take home."

The offer didn't appeal to Oyster Brown in the least. "For the last time, Mr. Trigger," she said in a tight, clipped voice, "I don't require another kettle." With that, she walked away up the high street.

Trigger, from the motives he had mentioned, was not content to leave the matter there. He wasn't a churchgoer, but he believed in conducting his life on humanitarian principles. On this issue, he was resolved to be just as stubborn as she. He went back into the shop and straight to the phone. While Oyster Brown was out of the house, he would speak to Pearl Brown, the sister, and see if he could get better cooperation from her.

Nobody answered the phone.

At lunchtime, he called in to see Ted Collins, who ran the garden shop next door, and asked if he had seen anything of Pearl Brown lately.

"I had Oyster in this morning," Collins told him.

"But you haven't seen Pearl?"

"Not in my shop. Oyster does all the gardening, you know. They divide the work."

"I know."

"I can't think what came over her today. Do you know what she bought? Six bottles of Rapidrot."

"What's that?"

"It's a new product. An activator for composting. You dilute it and water your compost heap and it speeds up the process. They're doing a special promotion to launch it. Six bottles are far too much, and I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't be told."

"Those two often buy in bulk," said Trigger. "I've sold Pearl a dozen tubes of toothpaste at a go, and they must be awash with Dettol."

"They won't use six bottles of Rapidrot in twenty years," Collins pointed out. "It's concentrated stuff, and it won't keep all that well. It's sure to solidify after a time. I told her one's plenty to be going on with. She's wasted her money, obstinate old bird. I don't know what Pearl would say. Is she ill, do you think?"

"I've no idea," said Trigger, although in reality an idea was beginning to form in his brain. A disturbing idea. "Do they get on all right with each other? Daft question," he said before Collins could answer it. "They're twins. They've spent all their lives in each other's company."

For the present he dismissed the thought and gave his attention to the matter of the electric kettles. He'd already withdrawn the Steamquick kettles from sale. He got on the phone to Steamquick and had an acrimonious conversation with some little Hitler from their public-relations department who insisted that thousands of the kettles had been sold and the design was faultless.

"The lady's injury isn't imagined, I can tell you," Trigger insisted.

"She must have been careless. Anyone can hurt themselves if they're not careful. People are far too ready to put the blame on the manufacturer."

"People, as you put it, are your livelihood."

There was a heavy sigh. "Send us the offending kettle, and we'll test it."

"That isn't so simple."

"Have you offered to replace it?"

The man's whole tone was so condescending that Trigger had an impulse to frighten him rigid. "She won't let the kettle out of her possession. I think she may be keeping it as evidence."

"Evidence?" There was a pause while the implication dawned. "Blimey."

On his end of the phone, Trigger permitted himself to grin.

"You mean she might take us to court over this?"

"I didn't say that."

"Ah."

"But she does know the law. She's a magistrate."

An audible gasp followed, then: "Listen, Mr., er—"

"Trigger."

"Mr. Trigger. I think we'd better send someone to meet this lady and deal with the matter personally. Yes, that's what we'll do."

Trigger worked late that evening, stocktaking. He left the shop about 10:30. Out of curiosity he took a route home via Lime Tree Avenue and stopped the car opposite the Brown sisters' house and wound down the car window. There were lights upstairs and presently someone drew a curtain. It looked like Oyster Brown.

"Keeping an eye on your customers, Mr. Trigger?" a voice close to him said.

He turned guiltily. A woman's face was six inches from his. He recognized one of his customers, Mrs. Wingate. She said, "She's done that every night this week."

"Oh?"

"Something fishy's going on in there," she said. "I walk my little dog along the verge about this time every night. I live just opposite them, on this side, with the wrought-iron gates. That's Pearl's bedroom at the front. I haven't seen Pearl for a week, but every night Oyster draws the curtains and leaves the light on for half an hour. What's going on, I'd like to know. If Pearl is ill, they ought to call a doctor. They won't, you know."

"That's Pearl's bedroom, you say, with the light on?"

"Yes, I often see her looking out. Not lately."

"And now Oyster switches on the light and draws the curtains?"

"And pulls them back at seven in the morning. I don't know what you think, Mr. Trigger, but it looks to me as if she wants everyone to think Pearl's in there, when it's obvious she isn't."

"Why is it obvious?"

"All the windows are closed. Pearl always opens the top window wide, winter and summer."

"That is odd, now you mention it."

"I'll tell you one thing," said Mrs. Wingate, regardless that she had told him several things already, "whatever game she's up to, we won't find out. Nobody ever sets foot inside that house except the twins themselves."

At home and in bed that night, Trigger was troubled by a gruesome idea, one that he'd tried repeatedly to suppress. Suppose the worst had happened a week ago in the house in Lime Tree Avenue, his thinking ran. Suppose Pearl Brown had suffered a heart attack and died. After so many years of living in that house as if it were a fortress, was Oyster capable of dealing with the aftermath of death, calling in the doctor and the undertaker? In her shocked state, mightn't she decide that anything was preferable to having the house invaded, even if the alternative was disposing of the body herself?

How would a middle-aged woman dispose of a body? Oyster didn't drive a car. It wouldn't be easy to bury it in the garden, nor hygienic to keep it in a cupboard in the house. But if there was one thing every well bred English lady knew about, it was gardening.

Oyster was the gardener.

In time, everything rots in a compost heap. If you want to accelerate the process, you buy a preparation like Rapidrot.

Oyster Brown had purchased six bottles of the stuff. And every night she drew the curtains in her sister's bedroom to give the impression that she was there.

He shuddered.

In the fresh light of morning, John Trigger told himself that his morbid imaginings couldn't be true. They were the delusions of a tired brain. He decided to do nothing about them.

Just after 11:30, a short fat man in a dark suit arrived in the shop and announced himself as the Area Manager of Steamquick. His voice was suspiciously like the one Trigger had found so irritating when he had phoned their head office. "I'm here about this allegedly faulty kettle," he announced.

"Miss Brown's?"

"I'm sure there's nothing wrong at all, but we're a responsible firm. We take every complaint seriously."

"You want to see the kettle? You'll be lucky."

The Steamquick man sounded smug. "That's all right. I telephoned Miss Brown this morning and offered to go to the house. She wasn't at all keen on that idea, but I was very firm with the lady and she compromised. We're meeting here at noon. She's agreed to bring the kettle for me to inspect. I don't know why you found her so intractable."

"High noon, eh? Do you want to use my office?"

Trigger had come to a rapid decision. If Oyster was on her way to the shop, he was going out. He had two capable assistants.

This was a heaven-sent opportunity to lay his macabre theory to rest. While Oyster was away from the house in Lime Tree Avenue, he would drive there and let himself into the back garden. Mrs. Wingate or any other curious neighbor watching from behind the lace curtains would have to assume he was trying to deliver something. He kept his white coat on, to reinforce the idea that he was on official business.

Quite probably, he told himself, the compost heap will turn out to be no bigger than a cowpat. The day was sunny and he felt positively cheerful as he turned up the avenue. He checked his watch. Oyster would be making mincemeat of the Steamquick man about now. It would take her twenty minutes, at least, to walk back.

He stopped the car and got out. Nobody was about, but just in case he was being observed he walked boldly up the path to the front door and rang the bell. No one came.

Without appearing in the least furtive, he stepped around the side of the house. The back garden was in a beautiful state. Wide, well stocked, and immaculately weeded borders enclosed a finely trimmed lawn, yellow roses on a trellis, and a kitchen garden beyond. Trigger took it in admiringly, and then remembered why he was there. His throat went dry. At the far end, beyond the kitchen garden, slightly obscured by some runner beans on poles, was the compost heap—as long as a coffin and more than twice as high.

The flesh on his arms prickled.

The compost heap was covered with black-plastic bin liners weighted with stones. They lay across the top, but the sides were exposed. A layer of fresh green garden refuse, perhaps half a meter in depth, was on the top. The lower part graduated in color from a dull yellow to earth-brown. Obvious care had been taken to conserve

the shape, to keep the pressure even and assist the composting process.

Trigger wasn't much of a gardener. He didn't have the time for it. He did the minimum and got rid of his garden rubbish with bonfires. Compost heaps were outside his experience, except that as a scientist he understood the principle by which they generated heat in a confined space. Once, years ago, an uncle of his had demonstrated this by pushing a bamboo cane into his heap from the top. A wisp of steam had issued from the hole as he withdrew the cane. Recalling it now, Trigger felt a wave of nausea.

He hadn't the stomach for this.

He knew now that he wasn't going to be able to walk up the garden and probe the compost heap. Disgusted with himself for being so squeamish, he turned to leave, and happened to notice that the kitchen window was ajar, which was odd considering that Oyster wasn't at home. Out of interest, he tried the door handle. The door was unlocked.

He said, "Anyone there?" and got no answer.

From the doorway he could see a number of unopened letters on the kitchen table. After the humiliation of turning his back on the compost heap, this was like a challenge, a chance to regain some self-respect. This, at least, he was capable of doing. He stepped inside and picked up the letters. There were five, all addressed to Miss P. Brown. The postmarks dated from the beginning of the previous week.

Quite clearly, Pearl had not been around to open her letters.

Then his attention was taken by an extraordinary lineup along a shelf. He counted fifteen packets of cornflakes, all open, and recalled his conversation with Ted Collins about the sisters buying in bulk. If Collins had wanted convincing, there was ample evidence here: seven bottles of decaffeinated coffee, nine jars of the same brand of marmalade, and a tall stack of boxes of paper tissues. Eccentric housekeeping, to say the least. Perhaps, he reflected, it meant that the buying of six bottles of Rapidrot had not, after all, been so sinister.

But now that he was in the house, he wasn't going to leave without seeking an answer to the main mystery, the disappearance of Pearl. His mouth was no longer dry and the gooseflesh had gone from his arms. He made up his mind to go upstairs and look into the front bedroom.

On the other side of the kitchen door, more extravagance was

revealed. The passage from the kitchen to the stairway was lined on either side with sets of goods that must have overflowed from the kitchen. Numerous tins of cocoa, packets of sugar, pots of jam, gravy powder, and other grocery items were stored as if for a siege, stacked along the skirting boards in groups of at least half a dozen. Trigger began seriously to fear for the mental health of the twins. Nobody had suspected anything like this behind the closed doors. The stacks extended halfway upstairs.

As he stepped upward, obliged to tread close to the banister, he was gripped by the sense of alienation that must have led to hoarding on such a scale. The staid faces that the sisters presented to the world gave no intimation of this strange compulsion. What was the mentality of people who behaved as weirdly as this?

An appalling possibility crept into Trigger's mind. Maybe the strain of so many years of appearing outwardly normal had finally caused Oyster to snap. What if the eccentricity so apparent all around him now were not so harmful as it first appeared? No one could know what resentments, what jealousies lurked in this house, what mean-minded cruelties the sisters may have inflicted on each other. What if Oyster had fallen out with her sister and attacked her? She was a sturdy woman, physically capable of killing.

If she'd murdered Pearl, the compost-heap method of disposal would certainly commend itself.

Come now, he told himself, this is all speculation.

He reached the top stair and discovered that the stockpiling had extended to the landing. Toothpaste, talcum powder, shampoos, and soap were stacked up in profusion. All the doors were closed. It wouldn't have surprised him if when he opened one he was knee-deep in toilet rolls.

First he had to orientate himself. He decided that the front bedroom was to his right. He opened it cautiously and stepped in.

What happened next was swift and devastating. John Trigger heard a piercing scream. He had a sense of movement to his left and a glimpse of a figure in white. Something crashed against his head with a mighty thump, causing him to pitch forward.

About four, when the Brown twins generally stopped for tea, Oyster filled the new kettle that the Steamquick Area Manager had exchanged for the other one. She plugged it in. It was the new-fangled jug type and she wasn't really certain if she was going to like it, but she certainly needed the cup of tea.

"I know it was wrong," she said, "and I'm going to pray for forgiveness, but I didn't expect that steaming a stamp off a letter would lead to this. I suppose it's a judgment."

"Whatever made you do such a wicked thing?" her sister Pearl asked, as she put out the cups and saucers.

"The letter had to catch the post. It was the last possible day for the Kellogg's Cornflakes competition, and I'd thought of such a wonderful slogan. The prize was a fortnight in Venice."

Pearl clicked her tongue in disapproval. "Just because I won the Birds Eye trip to the Bahamas, it didn't mean *you* were going to be lucky. We tried for twenty years and only ever won consolation prizes."

"It isn't really gambling, is it?" said Oyster. "It isn't like betting."

"It's all right in the Lord's eyes," Pearl told her. "It's a harmless pastime. Unfortunately, we both know that people in the church won't take a charitable view. They wouldn't expect us to devote so much of our time and money to competitions. That's why we have to be careful. You didn't tell anyone I was away?"

"Of course not. Nobody knows. For all they know, you were ill, if anyone noticed at all. I drew the curtains in your bedroom every night to make it look as if you were here."

"Thank you. You know I'd do the same for you."

"I *might* win," said Oyster. "Someone always does. I put in fifteen entries altogether, and the last one was a late inspiration."

"And as a result we have fifteen packets of cornflakes with the tops cut off," said Pearl. "They take up a lot of room."

"So do your frozen peas. I had to throw two packets away to make some room in the freezer. Anyway, I felt entitled to try. It wasn't much fun being here alone, thinking of you sunning yourself in the West Indies. To tell you the truth, I didn't really think you'd go and leave me here. It was a shock."

Oyster carefully poured some hot water into the teapot to warm it. "If you want to know, I've also entered the Rapidrot Trip of a Lifetime competition. A week in San Francisco followed by a week in Sydney. I bought six bottles to have a fighting chance."

"What's Rapidrot?"

"Something for the garden." She spooned in some tea and poured on the hot water. "You must be exhausted. Did you get any sleep on the plane?"

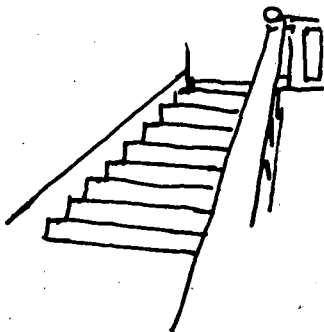
"Hardly any," said Pearl. "That's why I went straight to bed when I got in this morning." She poured milk into the teacups. "The next

thing I knew was the doorbell going. I ignored it, naturally. It was one of the nastiest shocks I ever had, hearing the footsteps coming up the stairs. I could tell it wasn't you. I'm just thankful that I had the candlestick to defend myself with."

"Is there any sign of life yet?"

"Well, he's breathing, but he hasn't opened his eyes, if that's what you mean. Funny, I would never have thought Mr. Trigger was dangerous to women."

Oyster poured the tea. "What are we going to do if he doesn't recover? We can't have people coming into the house." Even as she was speaking, she put down the teapot and glanced out of the kitchen window toward the end of the garden. She had the answer herself.



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a **NEW** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Martin raised his glass. "Joy to dead poets."

"Keep your voice down, you fool," his wife said.

"I didn't say dead brothers."

"He's not your brother, he's your half brother. If you'd had the right father instead of the boozier you take after, this would be your veranda we're sitting on and your own Scotch you'd be drinking ..."

DEAD POETS

by **DONALD OLSON**

The fading sun, balanced on the rocky tip of the headland, spread a copper wash across the bay, gave to the soaring white columns of the veranda a pinkish glow like marble, and added a deeper flush to the heavy, somber face of a middle-aged man sprawled on a wicker settee as he brooded like some fleshy prophet of doom over the darkening panorama of sea and sand dunes. He was finishing his third straight whisky when his wife Judith came out to join him. Her body was flat and supple and she wore a look of hard, smiling efficiency which seemed never to change; only in her tone of voice, now edged with contempt, might her moods be read.

"You'll never be able to do it if you're drunk all the time," she said, pushing his knees aside to make room for herself.

"I sure as hell won't be able to do it if I'm sober," he grumbled.

"You'll do it. When the time comes, you'll do it. We both know what'll happen if you don't, and I don't fancy myself as a penniless widow."

His somewhat toadlike eyes remained fixed on the glareless, weakening sun. "You think there's a special place in hell for fratricides?" he mused darkly.

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"Ask your brother, he's the authority on Dante and all those other dead poets."

Martin raised his glass. "Joy to dead poets."

"Keep your voice down, you fool."

"I didn't say dead brothers."

"He's not your brother, he's your half brother. If *you'd* had the right father instead of the boozier you take after, this would be your veranda we're sitting on and your own Scotch you'd be drinking."

He stared pettishly into his empty glass. "Sunday morning it will be mine. For a little while, at least. Maybe we'll buy one of those condos the syndicate plans to build along the shore. You'd like that, wouldn't you, babe? Get us out of that stinking flat in town."

Martin and Judith had been invited to a weekend house party at the shore to celebrate half brother Tyler's return from a year's teaching fellowship at the University of Bonn in Germany. Tyler, a published poet and university instructor, was the scholarly, unworldly heir to his late father's estate. The other guests were Nina Deppas, Tyler's fiancée; Tom Driscoll, a university confrere of Tyler's, and his wife Mary; and a German woman named Frieda Draheim. All Martin and Judith knew about Frieda was that she was a politically unpopular intellectual Tyler had helped to leave Germany and hoped to assist in getting an instructor's post at his own university.

"Tyler's alone in the tower room," said Judith, snatching the glass from Martin's hand before he could refill it. "You'd better go up and tell him about the letters. And for God's sake—"

She broke off as Frieda Draheim came out of the house. Perhaps in her fifties, she had a smooth round face, unstylishly bobbed black hair, and anxious, plum-colored eyes. She wore a shaggy tweed skirt, plain white blouse, and loose-fitting cardigan. Dowdy would have been Judith's word for her.

Martin made an awkward, half hearted move to rise, settled for a flabby wave of his hand. "Join us for a drink, Miss— Fraulein."

"Please, call me Frieda. Thank you, no. I go for a little walk. So beautiful, yes? There is perhaps a way down to the shore?"

"Those wooden steps. Or you can take the path through the woods just beyond that wicket gate."

Frieda stood for a moment gazing out over the broad, shallow bay, a sadly reminiscent smile on her face. "It is like the Baltic. It reminds me, you see, of Rügen Island, where we took our holidays when I was a girl."

When neither Martin nor Judith replied, she set off across the lawn toward the wicket gate.

Looking after her, Martin muttered: "Don't trip over the rifle, dearie."

"My God, don't tell me you didn't hide it!"

"Lighten up, Judith. Of course I hid it."

"Did you notice those stockings? And the *shoes*?"

"Just the sort of homeless waif Tyler would take under his wing," said Martin. "He never changes. God, the parade of stray dogs and cats he used to drag home. Drove poor mother wild."

Judith regarded him with her brittle, humorless smile. "You really despise him, don't you?"

"I hate him. Always have. He grew up in an ivory tower and never came down. Thank God I'll never have to grovel to him again for a few nickels and dimes."

Does one ever return from a long trip without a certain morbid feeling of expectancy? Something must have happened during one's absence: fire, theft, the sudden death of a friend. The discovery that nothing *has* happened, nothing *has* changed, seems to violate some law of probability.

Such were Tyler's thoughts as he stood at the window in the octagonal tower room he used as a study, gazing out across the bay to the wooded hills, which seemed in his absence to have acquired the dull, dusty monotones of a dying summer.

Minutes after his half brother had interrupted these thoughts, Tyler could only believe they must have been inspired by some prevision of disaster. Not that Martin's extraordinary revelation had unduly alarmed him—Martin's life had been one endless reel of cheap melodramas.

Now Tyler studied the crudely lettered note with the same analytical scrutiny he might have given to a freshman's unsatisfactory essay. Then he adjusted his glasses, rubbed the narrow tip of his nose, and pursed his lips before speaking.

"It will happen without warning. It will look like an accident," he read aloud. "You say you've had others?"

"Several. The police have them. Not that they'll take any action until the damn lunatic's killed me."

"Lunatic? Then you know who—"

"Hell, of course I don't *know*. I've no idea. But who but a lunatic would send stuff like that to me?"

Tyler's pale, ascetic features bore not the slightest resemblance to his half brother's, as if neither had inherited a single gene from the mother they'd had in common. "Marty, you can hardly pretend you haven't made enemies. We both know you've been embroiled in some fairly nasty business fiascos." His glance sharpened. "That money I gave you to pay off those gamblers. *Did* you pay them?"

"I'm all in one piece, aren't I? Besides, none of the notes demanded money. That's what worries me. They're simply threats."

Tyler's expression seemed to regard the entire matter as some sort of distasteful, childish game. "I can appreciate your concern, but what do you expect me to do about it?"

"Not a damn thing. What *could* you do? It was Judith insisted I tell you. She thinks you ought to know. Poor woman's a nervous wreck."

Tyler returned his gaze to the window. "In that case, I can only suggest you get away for a while. A long cruise, away from everything and everyone."

"You know damn well I can't afford a cruise."

"Talk to the travel people. I'll foot the bill."

"Thanks," said Martin grudgingly. "I'll see what Judith thinks." And then, casually: "Have you given any thought to what we talked about before you went away? You still determined to hang onto this white elephant?"

Tyler cast him a withering glance. "Do you really think I could live with myself if I sold all this to developers? It may be home for only a couple of months in the year, but it remains a sacred trust. As long as I'm alive, this stretch of shoreline won't be despoiled."

Despite Martin's attempt at lightness, the bitterness leaked through. "A guy in your position can afford to take that view."

"Don't try to make me feel guilty, Marty. You had plenty of chances to do something constructive with your inheritance."

"Such as it was."

As he descended the stairs from the tower room, Martin was conscious of having left behind whatever lingering qualms he'd had about killing his half brother.

Nina Deppas was blonde and tiny, with an engaging sense of fun that masked a nature as essentially serious as Tyler's. She had already met Frieda in New York and treated her with the fond intimacy of an old friend. The Driscolls were meeting Frieda for the first time and Tom, a political-science instructor, was eager to draw

her out on the extraordinary upheavals in Eastern Europe. She spoke earnestly about the situation, remaining silent about her own involvement except to observe that she might have found herself in desperate circumstances had it not been for Tyler's intervention.

"We didn't realize you wielded any political clout," Mary Driscoll teased Tyler. "Have you been leading a double life over there?"

Tyler laughed. "No one could be more non-political than I, as you very well know. Poets, however, have their uses outside the classroom. I was able to help Frieda just as W. H. Auden helped a friend in similar circumstances."

Nina, as if realizing Judith and Martin might be feeling left out, turned to Judith and said, "Tyler's been working on a critical biography of the British poet."

"Is that a fact?" murmured Judith, who had never heard the name before. "He's dead, I suppose."

"Good poets never die," said Driscoll.

"Which I suppose explains, dear," said Nina to Tyler, "why you've never thought it necessary to make a will."

For which stupid lack of foresight, thought Judith, Martin will owe his life. There could be no contest over Tyler's estate, Martin being his only blood relative.

"I simply never got around to it," confessed Tyler. "If it's any comfort to you, my love, I have an appointment with my lawyers next week."

"Have you set the wedding date?" Judith asked. Not that it mattered; death would cancel that lawyer's appointment.

Tyler exchanged a conspiratorial smile with his fiancée. "Tentatively. As soon as a few complications have been unraveled."

Martin exploded. "Complications! You don't know the meaning of the word. Your life is all poetry and roses. You don't have a madman threatening your life."

Judith, on cue, quickly intervened. "Martin, shut up. We agreed—"

"Why the hell shouldn't they all know? Tyler knows. The cops know."

And so it all came out and everyone offered useless advice, reviling the passive attitude of the police in refusing to act on threats unaccompanied by actual physical violence. Judith agreed that Tyler's suggestion of a long trip seemed the most prudent advice. "But we wouldn't dream of going before the wedding."

Frieda adroitly seized upon this remark to change the subject. "You will hold the wedding here?"

Nina replied that they'd talked of it and Frieda clapped her hands. "A perfect setting, yes? Weddings are perhaps all solemnized in the sight of God, but they seem more so when held in a garden. And such a lovely garden you have."

"The house has known its grand occasions," said Tyler. "All in the past now. It's much too big for the sort of modest life we'll be leading. And the taxes are formidable. Marty keeps nagging me to sell the property to developers."

"No, no!" cried Frieda with passion. "Never must you sell this land, dear friend, never! I know what it is like, you see, to lose the ancestral home. To be left rootless!"

"No fear of that, Frieda," laughed Tyler. "Nina and I plan to raise a big family. It will all be theirs someday."

Presently, the talk turned to university affairs, leaving Martin to amuse himself with the secret knowledge of how soon they would all be evicted from their fool's paradise.

Martin was still in a mood of grumbling resentment as he and Judith prepared for bed. "Bloody bookworms! None of 'em know what real life is all about."

"Well, at least they all know about the threats now," said Judith. "It won't come as a complete surprise when things go boom."

Her tone of levity angered Martin. "Yeah, well, maybe you're looking forward to tomorrow. I'm not."

"Cold feet again? Just remember, they'll be a lot colder if you mess up tomorrow. You wouldn't be in this fix if you hadn't tried to swindle the wrong guy."

"So how the hell did I know Ferguson was tied to those villains? And that they'd had their greedy eyes on this stretch of shoreline for months? If I hadn't promised to deliver it to them I'd be wearing cement shoes right now. They weren't bluffing, you know. If anything goes wrong, I'm dead."

"What can go wrong? The plan is perfect."

"I don't fancy winging myself after I shoot Tyler and then having to bury the damn gun."

"Don't be such a baby. You've already dug the hole."

He glared at her. "It's not like pricking yourself with a needle, you know."

"It has to be done. The police have got to believe the gunman was trying to kill you, not Tyler."

"What if the cops take a closer look at those notes after he's dead?"

"Let them. There's no way they could prove we wrote them ourselves."

"What if they manage to find the gun?" he persisted.

"You think they'll dig up the whole woods looking for it? Don't be dumb. And what if they did find it? Your *friends* would hardly have provided you with a gun that could be traced to anyone."

Martin sank into bed with a mournful groan. "A hired killer. That's what I am. A hit man. God, why couldn't they give the job to one of their own kind?"

Judith's hard little smile was devoid of pity. "They did."

A buffet lunch on the lawn had been planned for the following day, which promised to be fair and seasonably mild despite a prediction of late-afternoon showers. As if presuming upon her soon-to-be-realized role of lady of the house, Judith insisted the preparations be left to her while the Driscolls slept in after their late night of bridge and chatter. With forced graciousness, she was obliged to accept Frieda Draheim's pleas that she be allowed to help.

"There is, you see, so little I can do for Tyler," she confided to Judith in the kitchen. "So grateful I am for the generosity he shows. So great kindness to one who knows him for so short a time, yes?"

"That's Tyler," said Judith drily, peeling an orange for the salad with quick, nervous efficiency. "As my husband was saying only last night, Tyler was always bringing home strays." And then, as if deploring her tactlessness: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Frieda laughed. "Do not apologize. I *am* a stray."

Nina suggested croquet before lunch. While Martin helped Judith carry out the table and chairs, the others occupied themselves with resounding merriment at the far end of the lawn. At noon, they all sat down to grilled steaks and salad and Frieda's walnut torte.

At the end of the meal Martin patted his stomach and said he was going for a short walk to the stone jetty and back. The Driscolls volunteered to do the washing up, leaving it unnecessary for Judith to employ the stratagem she'd planned to keep them busy inside the house.

Frieda retired to the veranda with a book while Nina and Tyler sprawled on the grass in the midday sun. Judith waited in her room for twenty minutes before going outside.

"Tyler, I know I'm being silly, but would you be a dear and see

if you can find Martin? Ever since those awful notes began arriving, I worry when he's off somewhere on his own."

Tyler smiled. "I'm sure he's safe up here."

"Well, but he said he'd be back in ten minutes. Please. I'd go myself but he gets in such a rage when he thinks I'm fussing."

"Okay, if it'll make you feel better. Which way did he go?"

"Through the woods. The long path. Thank you, Tyler."

As Tyler crossed the lawn and disappeared among the trees, Judith sat down on the grass beside Nina. "I'm not ordinarily the nervous type. It's the not knowing, you see, if those filthy letters are someone's idea of a joke. The police seem to think they are."

That her nerves were on edge was no lie. Despite what Martin had to lose if anything went wrong, she had little confidence in him, fearing it all too possible that his resolve might weaken at the last minute.

She tried to make small talk. "You're not really putting off the wedding, are you?" she asked Nina.

"Not for longer than necessary. There's so much to do, and then with this business about Frieda to get settled—"

"You seem to be making a great fuss over Frieda. I know we're supposed to feel sorry for refugees—"

"Frieda's not exactly a *refugee*."

"Well, whatever. I know Tyler's always been a pushover for a sob story. Lord knows, Martin himself has taken advantage often enough of his brother's weakness."

"I've never regarded compassion as a weakness," replied Nina coolly. "Tyler—"

She broke off as they both heard it, the muffled but unmistakable sound of a gunshot, followed seconds later by another.

"Poachers?" said Nina, looking toward the woods with a frown.

Judith's throat was suddenly too dry to speak. One hand flew to her heart, which seemed to be striking off the seconds when Nina cried out: "Good heavens—is that Martin?"

Judith leaped up and turned to see Martin stumbling out of the woods, limping toward them with the clumsy rolling gait of a drunkard.

"Oh, my God!" screamed Judith as she ran toward him, Nina following.

Martin's face was white and blotched with sweat, blood seeping through the torn fabric of his trouser leg below one knee.

"Judith! Oh, Christ, Judith, Nina—something terrible's happened!"

The swollen mass of clouds that moved in over the headland shortly after Tyler's body had been taken away, and while the police were still combing the woods and shoreline, deepened the funereal atmosphere within the house. The doctor having treated the minor flesh wound in his calf, Martin lay on the sofa drinking whisky and repeating endlessly, as if repetition would make it true, his story of what happened in the woods, the sudden attack of an unseen assailant. "The bullet was meant for me," he kept saying.

"You mustn't reproach yourself, Martin," said Driscoll. "You might as easily have been killed yourself."

"If it was anyone's fault it was mine," said Judith. "I'm the one who sent Tyler to look for Martin. We shouldn't have come—we shouldn't have come."

Nina remained silent, with a distant, faintly bewildered look on her face. She hadn't once broken down, even when she'd bent over Tyler's shattered body. That she found all this futile breast-beating distasteful, even spurious, didn't become clear until Judith, with an air of pulling herself together, said: "Life must go on. I don't suppose anyone's hungry, but we really should have something. You're all welcome to stay for the rest of the weekend. I'm sure Martin feels the same way."

At this Nina came alive, as if something in Judith's tone had shattered the icy crust of her grief. "Martin *feels*? Since when did Martin ever *feel*?"

The flush deepened on Martin's face. "Now just a damned minute—"

"Shut up, Martin," Judith snapped. "Pay no attention. Nina's upset. We all are. Frieda had the right idea. I think the rest of us should go to our rooms, too."

"You can stop playing the hostess, Judith," said Nina coldly. "And you needn't tell us who is and who is not welcome in Tyler's house."

Judith rose to the challenge with an aggressive thrust of her chin. "Tyler's house? This is no longer *Tyler's* house. Nor does Tyler any longer decide what's to become of it."

"You're right," Nina retorted. "There's something you ought to know. Something Tyler planned to tell you before the weekend was over. He gave you a clue last night, but of course you didn't pick up on it. I'm talking about Frieda and the way Tyler helped her come

to this country. There was another woman in Germany back in the Thirties. Her name was Erika Mann. She was the daughter of a famous German novelist I'm sure you've never heard of. She, too, was desperate to leave Germany. The poet Auden helped her to do that—in the only way he could. The same way Tyler helped Frieda—with my blessing and approval."

Driscoll sprang to his feet. "I'll be damned. So *that's* what he meant. A marriage of convenience. Tyler *married* Frieda!"

"Yes," said Nina. "That's why Tyler and I had to delay our plans temporarily. And as Frieda and Tyler were still married when he died, and since he died intestate, everything he owned goes to Frieda. Frieda and I both know how Tyler felt about this house, Martin, so I'm afraid if you had any plans—"

Martin and Judith exchanged a long look. From their rapt expressions in the silence that followed, they might have been hearing in their minds the reverberation of those gunshots in the woods, growing louder and louder, while the others looked toward the window, hearing nothing more terrifying than the rumble of distant thunder.



DETECTIVERSE

BLOOD BATH

by SEYMOUR KAPETANSKY

A gent with a brand-new Jacuzzi
Showed it off to a hitman's floosie.
They stripped, unabashed,
And, naked, splish-splashed
Till her boy friend turned up with his Uzi.

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EQMM 50TH ANNIVERSARY CONTEST

Questions 21–25 in our fifty-question contest appear below. We're at the halfway mark. Be sure not to send your answers as the questions appear. They must be submitted as a unit to qualify. See rules and other information on the facing page.

21. Who wrote *The Third Man*, first as a film, then as a short novel?
22. The movie *Love from a Stranger* with Ann Harding and Basil Rathbone (1937) was adapted from a short story by Agatha Christie. What is the title of the story?
23. Who wrote the novel from which Alfred Hitchcock made his classic film *Strangers on a Train*?
24. A twice-made movie and novel about Jack the Ripper originated as a short story. What is the title?
25. Who wrote it?

- First Prize:** Limited-edition poster of *EQMM*'s first cover
Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen, edited by
Eleanor Sullivan, published by Carroll & Graf
Ellery Queen 50th Anniversary mug
The option to appear on a cover of *EQMM* with a ce-
lebrity of the winner's choice who agrees to said cover
- Second and Third Prizes:** Limited-edition poster of *EQMM*'s first
cover
- Fourth through Thirteenth Prizes:** *Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery
Queen*
- Fourteenth through Twenty-third Prizes:** Ellery Queen 50th An-
niversary mugs

The winner will be the top scorer in answering 50 questions related to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*—there will be 5 questions an issue from January through October 1991. In case of a tie, the earliest postmark will determine the winner. The deadline is October 15, 1991—entries should carry a postmark no later than that date.

All 50 questions must be submitted as a unit, the pages or copies of the pages for all ten issues together. Material sent in sections will not be considered. Only one entry will be allowed per person. All entries must include the contestant's legal name and full address. No entries will be returned, even if accompanied by a return envelope. Winners will be notified by mail and announced in the March 1992 issue. (No phone calls, please.)

Contributors to *EQMM* are not eligible to win the contest, nor are employees and their immediate families of Davis Publications, Inc., Carlson Promotion Group, or any of their affiliated agents, advertising, and promotional production agencies. All applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations apply.

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HERCULE POIROT IN THE YEAR 2010

by JON L. BREEN

“It’s Mrs. Harbottle,” the elderly lady insisted to the ticket taker on the New York-London underground. “Missus, spelled M-i-s-s-u-s.” She fumbled with her change and her ticket and walked away muttering to herself. I’m proud I was Justin Harbottle’s wife, she thought, and proud to be his widow and none of this Miz rubbish. Here in America, you’d think they’d never heard of Miss and Missus.

She sat in the window seat of the six-passenger compartment, fumbling with her parcels. She did like a window seat, though there was little reason to covet one on the New York-London underground. Little reason for a window at all, really, since there was nothing to see. She hoped her seatmates would be nice. Forty-five minutes is a long time to spend with strangers, especially when one is getting on and every minute is precious.

The young gentleman who took the seat across from her nodded pleasantly. He was a nice-looking gentleman, but there was something about him that spelled foreigner to her. Not American foreigner, of course, but European foreigner. Which was silly, really, as her children so often reminded her, since in the United States of Europe every European is every Briton’s countryman; but it was hard for a girl—a lady—who had grown up in a time when they were all different countries to adjust to the changing times.

Let her children laugh—they were kind, really, understanding even when she insisted on modestly wearing her bikini when they went to the beach at Brighton, though the French and Italian and even the California beaches were now so much more accessible.

More passengers. An American man and his wife. Even now you could always tell an American. They were so impatient, always glancing at their watches. The wife was nice-looking, but her husband looked a brute, like a rock singer of her youth, though of course rock singers would be before his time no doubt. Or would they? It was so hard to keep track of the time going by.

© 1975 by Jon L. Breen.

Would they be going soon? No, there's one more passenger. Looks a big heavy-set man. Why, it was Gaylord Tenney, Mr. Harbottle's former business partner!

Mrs. Harbottle was terribly embarrassed. Not that she held a grudge against Tenney for having cheated Justin out of his half of the business and hastened his death, but surely Tenney would be equally embarrassed to find her sitting there. It would be a terribly awkward experience.

She almost got up and rushed off to await the next car, but, after all, she wanted to get home to London and one couldn't let other people run one's life, especially someone like Gaylord Tenney, who had done enough damage already.

But he didn't look the slightest bit embarrassed. He merely nodded all around and opened his newspaper calmly, as if none of his fellow passengers was anyone he recognized. But Mrs. Harbottle felt a general stiffening, as if the remaining passengers either knew him or sensed the sort of character he was behind his dignified moustache and tastefully tailor-made grey suit that would have passed muster even in the more sartorially exacting Seventies of Mrs. Harbottle's youth. Imagine the cheek of the man, just sitting there like that!

Well, as Mrs. Harbottle had always told herself, one would just have to make the best of it.

Alice Lane nudged her husband almost imperceptibly and got no reaction. Nudging him more perceptibly, she heard a whispered, "I know, I know." So he had recognized Gaylord Tenney as well. Right here in the same car with them, going to London.

The devil with him, Alice said to herself, fixing her chin determinedly. So he was going to England—her ancestral home, Counterbridge House, the last stately home left in England, was hers and no one else's. Tenney didn't have a leg to stand on with his false claim, so there was no need to worry.

She cast a fond glance at her husband. He was so American! Could he be happy in an English country mansion with an acre and a half of vast inherited lands? True, she was of the American side of the family and had never been to England, but she'd seen so many of those historical TV programs imported from the BBC that she knew she would feel right at home.

No need to think any more about Gaylord Tenney. Counterbridge House would be hers, an acre and a half all hers to roam in this crowded world...

Alex Lane looked at his watch for the hundredth time. Why weren't they moving, blast it? Not that there was any great hurry now—with that damned Gaylord Tenney in the same car, they would arrive in London simultaneously.

Alex ran a hand through his unfashionably long and sleek black hair. Was Tenney's claim to Counterbridge any good? Who could tell? But, if it was, the ten million dollars Alex was counting on from the sale of Counterbridge House to the television interests would fly out the window and he would be ruined financially.

He fingered the letter in his pocket, the letter making the offer. Still there. He hadn't told Alice about it yet, but that would come in time.

Sven Petrocelli felt the slight rumble that meant the New York-London underground was getting under way. Good. Finally. Once it got going, the ride would be so smooth you couldn't tell it from standing still. A quick transfer to the Peking line and he'd be in China by dinnertime. But it would have to be a quick transfer.

Could he make it before Gaylord Tenney had an opportunity to give him away to Scotland Yard? How they'd like to get him, but only Tenney knew who he was and only Tenney could denounce him.

If only some kind soul would eliminate Tenney.

Plunge the car into darkness first—that would be easy enough to do. Any experienced underground traveler would know it could be done by pulling the alarm switch next to each seat, an action that could easily be taken out of the view of the other passengers. The switches, obsolete now, had been quite necessary during the transport war of the 1990s. Then, of course, a quick thrust of some sharp implement into Tenney's heart and back into the seat quickly before the lights went back on. Who would know which of them did it?

If only someone would do that.

Maybe someone is planning it and that's why *I* thought of it, Sven mused. He had had some mind-reading training before the trouble, but it was dangerous to delve any further in that area without really knowing what you were doing. Instead, Sven would concentrate on willing Tenney dead.

What a tense group they were, Mrs. Harbottle mused. She made a tentative attempt to start some conversation.

"Are you French?" she asked the young, foreign-looking gentleman.

He seemed to bristle. "I am European," he said in an indeterminate accent. "And so, I believe, are you."

"Yes," she said, determined to ignore his rudeness. Well, he wasn't French then, or he'd have proudly proclaimed it. "Will you be staying long in London?"

A rueful smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Not any longer than I can help," he said. Seeing Mrs. Harbottle's face, he added hastily, "Not that I mean to reflect poorly on London, one of our greatest European cities."

A little mollified, she thought, He's not a European at all. No true European talks that silly patriotic way. True, he doesn't look Chinese, but—

The young foreigner seemed to be a thousand miles away, and their brief conversation was definitely concluded. What was he thinking about so hard?

Alice Lane found the English lady so tiresome. She tried to engage her on the subject of British history, but all she could talk about was shopping, shopping.

"Yes, I often shop in America. Not New York, it's so expensive—just like London, really."

Obviously not upper class. Oh, for some intelligent conversation to take her mind off Tenney. But conversation with whom? The young man looked to be meditating, Alex was tense and stiff as a board, and one could hardly start a conversation with Tenney himself.

How could he sit there so calmly, reading his newspaper, knowing there were at least two people in the car who could cheerfully murder him? How?

Alice paused in her thoughts to scream. The car was suddenly plunged into darkness. She sensed movement about her but couldn't tell who was moving where.

The lights were off perhaps thirty seconds, though it seemed a half hour. Toward the end, amid undifferentiated gasps and groans, Mrs. Harbottle piped up cheerfully, "Well, I think we have a bit of a problem. No need to worry, though."

"No need to worry?" Alex Lane echoed in a near-hysterical voice.

"Who knows how deep we are in the Atlantic, in total darkness, with no—"

He broke off when the lights came back on! More gasps and shrieks were vented as the four surviving passengers viewed the body of Gaylord Tenney, bleeding all over his newspaper, a dagger in his heart. Quite dead.

Sven Petrocelli might have observed with a faint smile on his face: Someone actually did it.

Alice Lane stared horror-stricken. Alex, she wanted to cry out loud, Alex, what have you done?

Alex Lane darted nervous eyes at his wife. If she goes to prison, he wondered, do I still get the property?

Mrs. Harbottle looked calmly at the body. I don't know who did this, she thought, I only know I didn't.

Just how old is he? Colonel Hart-Winston asked himself as he gazed across the desk at his visitor. One couldn't just ask, of course—that would never do—but one surely wondered, knowing something of the Belgian's past history. Let's see, it was now 2010, and he reportedly retired from the police early in the last century. Surely 150 was a conservative guess, but it hardly seemed possible. The egg-shaped head was smooth and unwrinkled, the moustaches as black as ever.

"Transplants, mon ami," said Hercule Poirot.

"Eh? What's that, Mr. Poirot?" Colonel Hart-Winston, jolted from his rather rude silence, turned a shade even redder than his norm. "Transplants, do you say?"

"But yes. My American doctor tells me I lead the league in transplants, though I don't know what league he refers to. And, more happily, artificial replacements. I was most pleased when I no longer had to depend on the unfortunate victims of accidents to keep me going. Very little of me, in any event, is the original part.

"Except, of course, the little grey cells. Those, I am pleased to say, are not amenable to transplant, and no method has been found to produce them artificially, though we all know what is being done with computers and androids and— But a thousand pardons, Colonel. I am growing garrulous in my old age, which you were so diligently attempting to guess at a moment ago."

"Forgive me. Intolerably rude. But how the deuce did you know I was speculating on your age? You don't read minds, surely?"

"Does the prospect alarm you?"

"Frankly, yes. This case has gone beyond the mind reader, which is about the only sort of detective left around these days. You're one of the few great detectives left, in the old sense."

"And with all the mind readers available, why do you suddenly need the old warhorse Poirot, so effectively put out of business by the new breed?"

"You'll be back in business before you know. Have you heard about Thought Therapy, Mr. Poirot?"

"A branch of psychiatry that gained importance in the 1980s, I believe. Most successful in curing serious mental disturbances. Do I gather that thought therapy is aiding criminals in escaping law enforcement?"

"We've been hearing for some time that thought therapists can teach people to so manipulate their conscious minds as to be immune to our thought readers. But I never had a specific example of it until our present case. I have four suspects in the murder of Gaylord Tenney—four suspects only—and one of them *has* to be the murderer. Anything else is physically impossible, and yet the thought readings on all four indicate innocence of the crime!

"I have only two alternatives—a physically impossible murder or some form of jamming our thought readings. I feel the latter is more likely, but in any case our people—highly strung mental gymnasts, you know the type—can do no more. Simple mind reading has been adequate to all crime-solving purposes for so long they know nothing else to do. That is why I have come to you."

"I have come to you."

"Yes, yes. Figuratively speaking, of course. Called you in. But, Mr. Poirot, I want your assurance you are not a mind reader. To employ an outside mind reader is against regulations, and really I hardly think you would do us much good if your old methods have been tainted with our new ones."

"Rest assured, sir, the little grey cells are still working."

"I'm relieved to hear it. I think the best starting point is for you to read the account of the murder that Ms. Oliver, our mind-wave recorder, has gleaned from the information of our mental investigators. I think you will find her account rather pleasantly old-fashioned in style. While you read, perhaps you will enjoy a glass of sherry?"

"A most interesting story," remarked Hercule Poirot. "How are

you able to get all the thoughts of the persons on the train—and is it a train?—with such accuracy?”

“It’s not generally known, Mr. Poirot, but when necessary we can recreate any thought on any underground car. As the term used to be, the cars are bugged. Of course, the thought records are only used in the case of a serious crime or other emergency such as this one. People must, after all, have some privacy, mustn’t they? In any case, you see our problem. All think innocent, yet one must be guilty.”

“A trifling problem for the little grey cells, mon ami.”

“Trifling? Surely not.”

“Quite trifling. Proof is another matter, however. If I could name the murderer, could you then use some extra mind-reading weapons to go a step deeper and dredge out the real evil thoughts underneath the innocent surface? For surely these thought therapists can only go so deep with their implantations.”

“Yes, I feel sure we could. But we cannot subject them all to that, Mr. Poirot. After all, the three innocent ones would have reason to complain. We could only proceed that way on one person, and then only when we are sure.”

“Bien. I, Hercule Poirot, am sure. Your stenographer, Ms. Oliver—is she, I wonder, some relative of an old friend of mine, Ariadne Oliver, the detective novelist?”

“Granddaughter, I believe. That’s where she gets the style.”

“I thought so. Dear Mrs. Oliver, a lovely, gracious lady, and always looking for some new twist on the least-likely-person solution. The narrator did it, or the policeman did it, or a supposed victim did it, or everybody did it, or nobody did it. But one thing that Mrs. Oliver could never do, and she probably wished she could, was to follow the thoughts of one of her characters, have that character overtly think in an innocent way, say through thoughts that ‘I am not guilty, I did not do it,’ and then turn out to be the murderer.

“That, of course, would be against the rules of fair play; it would be cheating, and thus forbidden. But now, at last, that is possible, and yet, alas, there is no one who writes detective novels any more. Truly a pity.”

“You were about to name the murderer, Mr. Poirot,” the colonel nodded.

“But of course. The key is the phenomenon of compensation. The person under thought therapy must concentrate very hard on *thinking innocent*. The *actually innocent* person does not. Therefore the

person undergoing thought therapy must be a little bit stronger, a little more emphatic.

"This person feels a need not just to have normal thoughts and normal reactions of surprise and horror and the imputation of guilt to others. This person needs to think *in an innocent way*, to say in his thoughts: *I did not do it. I am not guilty.*

"And you will note only one of the suspects did this, only one had this uncharacteristic thought. You remember from Ms. Oliver's account that only one person thought: I don't know who did this, I only know I didn't."

"Mrs. Harbottle!" the colonel exclaimed, reaching for the phone.

Hercule Poirot sighed. "If only Mrs. Oliver could be here to see this."



DETECTIVERSE

CAUSE AND EFFECT

by SEYMOUR KAPETANSKY

Poirot, as Dame Agatha tells,
Engages in deep-thinking spells—
The crooks he pursues
Will soon pay their dues
In their very own little grey cells.

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THE STRIPPER

by H. H. HOLMES

He was called Jack the Stripper because the only witness who had seen him and lived (J. F. Flugelbach, 1463 N. Edgemont) had described the glint of moonlight on bare skin. The nickname was inevitable.

Mr. Flugelbach had stumbled upon the fourth of the murders, the one in the grounds of City College. He had not seen enough to be of any help to the police, but at least he had furnished a name for the killer heretofore known by such routine cognomens as "butcher," "werewolf," and "vampire."

The murders in themselves were enough to make a newspaper's fortune. They were frequent, bloody, and pointless, since neither theft nor rape was attempted. The murderer was no specialist, like the original Jack, but rather an eclectic, like Kürten the Düsseldorf Monster, who struck when the mood was on him and disregarded age and sex. This indiscriminate taste made better copy; the menace threatened not merely a certain class of unfortunates but every reader.

It was the nudity, however, and the nickname evolved from it that made the cause truly celebrated. Feature writers dug up all the legends of naked murderers—Courvoisier of London, Durrant of San Francisco, Wallace of Liverpool, Borden of Fall River—and printed them as sober fact, explaining at length the advantages of avoiding the evidence of bloodstains.

When he read this explanation, he always smiled. It was plausible, but irrelevant. The real reason for nakedness was simply that it felt better that way. When the color of things began to change, his first impulse was to get rid of his clothing. He supposed that psychoanalysts could find some atavistic reason for that.

He felt the cold air on his naked body. He had never noticed that before. Noiselessly he pushed the door open and tiptoed into the study. His hand did not waver as he raised the knife . . .

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The Stripper case was Lieutenant Marshall's baby, and he was going nuts. His condition was not helped by the constant allusions of his colleagues to the fact that his wife had once been a stripper of a more pleasurable variety. Six murders in three months without a single profitable lead had reduced him to a state where a lesser man might have gibbered, and sometimes he thought it would be simpler to be a lesser man.

He barked into phones nowadays. He hardly apologized when he realized that his caller was Sister Ursula, that surprising nun who had once planned to be a policewoman and who had extricated him from several extraordinary cases. But that was just it; those had been extraordinary, freak locked-room problems while this was the horrible epitome of ordinary, clueless, plotless murder. There was no room in the Stripper case for the talents of Sister Ursula.

He was in a hurry and her sentences hardly penetrated his mind until he caught the word "Stripper." Then he said sharply, "So? Backtrack please, Sister. I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

"He says," her quiet voice repeated, "that he thinks he knows who the Stripper is but he hasn't enough proof. He'd like to talk to the police about it. And since he knows I know you, he asked me to arrange it—so that you wouldn't think him just a crank."

"Which," said Marshall, "he probably is. But to please you, Sister—What did you say his name is?"

"Flecker. Harvey Flecker. Professor of Latin at the University."

Marshall caught his breath. "Coincidence," he said flatly. "I'm on my way to see him now."

"Oh. Then he did get in touch with you himself?"

"Not with me," said Marshall. "With the Stripper."

"God rest his soul," Sister Ursula murmured.

"So. I'm on my way now. If you could meet me there and bring his letter—"

"Lieutenant, I know our order is a singularly liberal one, but still I doubt if Reverend Mother—"

"You're a material witness," Marshall said authoritatively. "I'll send a car for you. And don't forget the letter."

Sister Ursula hung up and sighed. She had liked Professor Flecker, both for his scholarly wit and for his quiet kindness. He was the only man who could hold his agnostic own with Father Pearson in disputatious sophistry, and he was also the man who had helped keep the Order's soup-kitchen open at the depth of the Depression.

She took up her breviary and began to read the office for the dead while she waited for the car.

"It's obvious," Professor Lowe enunciated, "that the Stripper is one of the three of us."

Hugo Ellis said, "Speak for yourself."

His voice cracked a little, and he seemed even younger than he looked.

Professor de' Cassis said nothing. His huge hunchbacked body crouched in the corner and he mourned his friend.

"So?" said Lieutenant Marshall. "Go on, Professor."

"It was by pure chance," Professor Lowe continued, his lean face alight with logical satisfaction, "that the back door was latched last night. We have been leaving it unfastened for Mrs. Carey since she lost her key, but Flecker must have forgotten that fact and inadvertently reverted to habit. Ingress by the front door was impossible, since it was not only secured by a spring lock but also bolted from within. None of the windows shows any sign of external tampering. The murderer presumably counted on the back door to make plausible the entrance of an intruder. But Flecker had accidentally secured it, and that accident," he concluded impressively, "will strap the Tripper."

Hugo Ellis laughed, and then looked ashamed of himself.

Marshall laughed, too. "Setting aside the spoonerism, Professor, your statement of the conditions is flawless. This house was locked tight as a drum. Yes, the Stripper is one of the three of you." It wasn't amusing when Marshall said it.

Professor de' Cassis raised his despondent head. "But why?" His voice was guttural. "Why?"

Hugo Ellis said, "Why? With a madman?"

Professor Lowe lifted one finger as though emphasizing a point in a lecture. "Ah, but is this a madman's crime? There is the point. When the Stripper kills a stranger, yes, he is mad. When he kills a man with whom he lives may he not be applying the technique of his madness to the purpose of his sanity?"

"It's an idea," Marshall admitted. "I can see where there's going to be some advantage in having a psychologist among the witnesses. But there's another witness I'm even more anxious to—" His face lit up as Sergeant Raglan came in. "She's here, Rags?"

"Yeah," said Raglan. "It's the Sister. Holy smoke, Loot, does this mean this is gonna be another screwy one . . . ?"

Marshall had said "she" and Raglan had said "the Sister." These facts may serve as sufficient characterization of Sister Felicitas, who had accompanied her. They were always a pair, yet always spoken of in the singular. Now Sister Felicitas dozed in the corner where the hunchback had crouched, and Marshall read and reread the letter which seemed like the posthumous utterance of the Stripper's latest victim:

"My dear Sister:

"I have reason to fear that someone close to me is Jack the Stripper.

"You know me, I trust, too well to think me a sensation-alist striving to be a star witness. I have grounds for what I say. This individual, whom I shall for the moment call 'Quasimodo' for reasons that might particularly appeal to you, first betrayed himself when I noticed a fleck of blood behind his ear—a trifle, but suggestive. Since then I have religiously observed his comings and goings, and found curious coincidences between the absence of Quasimodo and the presence elsewhere of the Stripper.

"I haven't a conclusive body of evidence, but I believe that I do have sufficient to bring to the attention of the authorities. I have heard you mention a Lieutenant Marshall who is a close friend of yours. If you will recommend me to him as a man whose word is to be taken seriously, I shall be deeply obliged.

"I may, of course, be making a fool of myself with my suspicions of Quasimodo, which is why I refrain from giving you his real name. But every man must do what is possible to rid this city a *negotio perambulante in tenebris*.

Yours respectfully,
Harvey Flecker"

"He didn't have much to go on, did he?" Marshall observed. "But he was right, God help him. And he may have known more than he cared to trust to a letter. He must have slipped somehow and let Quasimodo see his suspicions. What does that last phrase mean?"

"Lieutenant! And you an Oxford man!" exclaimed Sister Ursula.

"I can translate it. But what's its connotation?"

"It's from St. Jerome's vulgate of the ninetieth psalm. The Douay version translates it literally: *of the business that walketh about in the dark*. But that doesn't convey the full horror of that nameless

prowl*ing negotium*. It's one of the most terrible phrases I know, and perfect for the Stripper."

"Flecker was a Catholic?"

"No, he was a resolute agnostic, though I always had hopes that Thomist philosophy would lead him into the Church. I almost think he refrained because his conversion would have left nothing to argue with Father Pearson about. But he was an excellent Church Latinist and knew the liturgy better than most Catholics."

"Do you understand what he means by Quasimodo?"

"I don't know. Allusiveness was typical of Professor Flecker—he delighted in British crossword puzzles, if you see what I mean. But I think I could guess more readily if he hadn't said that it might particularly appeal to me."

"So? I can see at least two possibilities—"

"But before we try to decode the professor's message, Lieutenant, tell me what you have learned here. All I know is that the poor man is dead, may he rest in peace."

Marshall told her. Four university teachers lived in this ancient (for Southern California) two-story house near the campus. Mrs. Carey came in every day to clean for them and prepare dinner. When she arrived this morning at nine, Lowe and de' Cassis were eating breakfast and Hugo Ellis, the youngest of the group, was out mowing the lawn. They were not concerned over Flecker's absence. He often worked in the study till all hours and sometimes fell asleep there.

Mrs. Carey went about her work. Today was Tuesday, the day for changing the beds and getting the laundry ready. When she had finished that task, she dusted the living room and went on to the study.

The police didn't yet have her story of the discovery. Her scream had summoned the others, who had at once called the police and, sensibly, canceled their classes and waited. When the police arrived, Mrs. Carey was still hysterical. The doctor had quieted her with a hypodermic, from which she had not yet revived.

Professor Flecker had had his throat cut and—Marshall skipped over this hastily—suffered certain other butcheries characteristic of the Stripper. The knife, an ordinary kitchen-knife, had been left by the body as usual. He had died instantly, at approximately one in the morning, when each of the other three men claimed to be asleep.

More evidence than that of the locked doors proved that the Stripper was an inmate of the house. He had kept his feet clear of the

blood which bespattered the study, but he had still left a trail of small drops which revealed themselves to the minute police inspection—blood which had bathed his body and dripped off as he left his crime.

This trail led upstairs and into the bathroom, where it stopped. There were traces of watered blood in the bathtub and on one of the towels—Flecker's own.

"Towel?" said Sister Ursula. "But you said Mrs. Carey had made up the laundry bundle."

"She sends out only sheets and such—does the towels herself."

"Oh." The nun sounded disappointed.

"I know how you feel, Sister. You'd welcome a discrepancy anywhere, even in the laundry list. But that's the sum of our evidence. Three suspects, all with opportunity, none with an alibi. Absolutely even distribution of suspicion, and our only guidepost is the word Quasimodo. Do you know any of these three men?"

"I have never met them, Lieutenant, but I feel as though I knew them rather well from Professor Flecker's descriptions."

"Good. Let's see what you can reconstruct. First, Ruggiero de' Cassis, professor of mathematics, formerly of the University of Turin, voluntary exile since the early days of Fascism."

Sister Ursula said slowly, "He admired de' Cassis, not only for his first-rate mind but because he seemed to have adjusted himself so satisfactorily to life despite his deformity. I remember he said once, 'De' Cassis has never known a woman, yet every day he looks on Beauty bare.'"

"On Beauty— Oh, yes. Millay. *Euclid Alone*. All right. Now Marvin Lowe, professor of psychology, native of Ohio, and from what I've seen of him a prime pedant. According to Flecker—?"

"I think Professor Lowe amused him. He used to tell us the latest spoonerisms. He swore that flocks of students graduated from the University believing that modern psychology rested on the researches of two men named Frung and Jeud. Once Lowe said that his favorite book was Max Beerbohm's *Happy Hypocrite*. Professor Flecker insisted that was because it was the only one he could be sure of pronouncing correctly."

"But as a man?"

"He never said much about Lowe personally; I don't think they were intimate. But I do recall his saying, 'Lowe, like all psychologists, is the physician of Greek proverb.'"

"Who was told to heal himself? Makes sense. That speech man-

nerism certainly points to something a psychiatrist could have fun with. All right—how about Hugo Ellis, instructor in mathematics, native of Los Angeles?”

“Mr. Ellis was a child prodigy, you know. Extraordinary mathematical feats. But he outgrew them, I almost think deliberately. He made himself into a normal young man. Now he is, I gather, a reasonably good young instructor—just run of the mill. An adult with the brilliance which he had as a child might be a great man. Professor Flecker turned the French proverb around to fit him: ‘If youth could, if age knew—’”

“So. There they are. And which,” Marshall asked, “is Quasimodo?”

“Quasimodo.” Sister Ursula repeated the word, and other words seemed to follow it automatically. “*Quasimodo geniti infantes*—” She paused and shuddered.

“What’s the matter?”

“I think,” she said softly, “I know. But like Professor Flecker, I fear making a fool of myself—and worse, I fear damning an innocent man. Lieutenant, may I look through this house with you?”

He sat there staring at the other two and at the policeman watching them. The body was no longer in the next room, but the blood was. He had never before revisited the scene of the crime; that notion was the nonsense of legend. For that matter, he had never known his victim.

He let his mind go back to last night. Only recently had he been willing to do this. At first it was something that must be kept apart, divided from his normal personality. But he was intelligent enough to realize the danger of that. It could produce a seriously schizoid personality. He might go mad. Better to attain complete integration, and that could be accomplished only by frank self-recognition.

It must be terrible to be mad.

“Well, where to first?” asked Marshall.

“I want to see the bedrooms,” said Sister Ursula. “I want to see if Mrs. Carey changed the sheets.”

“You doubt her story? But she’s completely out of the— All right. Come on.”

Lieutenant Marshall identified each room for her as they entered it. Harvey Flecker’s bedroom by no means consorted with the neatness of his mind. It was a welter of papers and notes and hefty German works on Latin philology and puzzle books by Torquemada

and Caliban and early missals and codices from the University library. The bed had been changed and the clean upper sheet was turned back. Harvey Flecker would never soil it.

Professor de' Cassis's room was in sharp contrast—a chaste monastic cubicle. His books—chiefly professional works, with a sampling of Leopardi and Carducci and other Italian poets and an Italian translation of Thomas à Kempis—were neatly stacked in a case, and his papers were out of sight. The only ornaments in the room were a crucifix and a framed picture of a family group, in clothes of 1920.

Hugo Ellis's room was defiantly, almost parodistically the room of a normal, healthy college man, even to the University banner over the bed. He had carefully avoided both Flecker's chaos and de' Cassis's austerity; there was a precisely calculated normal litter of pipes and letters and pulp magazines. The pin-up girls seemed to be carrying normality too far, and Sister Ursula averted her eyes.

Each room had a clean upper sheet.

Professor Lowe's room would have seemed as normal as Ellis's, if less spectacularly so, if it were not for the inordinate quantity of books. Shelves covered all wall space that was not taken by door, window, or bed. Psychology, psychiatry, and criminology predominated, but there was a selection of poetry, humor, fiction for any mood.

Marshall took down William Roughead's *Twelve Scots Trials* and said, "Lucky devil! I've never so much as seen a copy of this before." He smiled at the argumentative pencilings in the margins. Then as he went to replace it, he saw through the gap that there was a second row of books behind. Paperbacks. He took one out and put it back hastily. "You wouldn't want to see that, Sister. But it might fit into that case we were proposing about repressions and word-distortions."

Sister Ursula seemed not to heed him. She was standing by the bed and said, "Come here."

Marshall came and looked at the freshly made bed.

Sister Ursula passed her hand over the mended but clean lower sheet. "Do you see?"

"See what?"

"The answer," she said.

Marshall frowned. "Look, Sister—"

"Lieutenant, your wife is one of the most efficient housekeepers I've ever known. I thought she had, to some extent, indoctrinated you. Think. Try to think with Leona's mind."

Marshall thought. Then his eyes narrowed and he said, "So."

"It is fortunate," Sister Ursula said, "that the Order of Martha of Bethany specializes in housework."

Marshall went out and called downstairs. "Raglan! See if the laundry's been picked up from the back porch."

The sergeant's voice came back. "It's gone, Loot. I thought there wasn't no harm—"

"Then get on the phone quick and tell them to hold it."

"But what laundry, Loot?"

Marshall muttered. Then he turned to Sister Ursula. "The men won't know, of course, but we'll find a bill somewhere. Anyway, we won't need that till the preliminary hearing. We've got enough now to settle Quasimodo."

He heard the Lieutenant's question and repressed a startled gesture. He had not thought of that. But even if they traced the laundry, it would be valueless as evidence without Mrs. Carey's testimony.

He saw at once what had to be done.

They had taken Mrs. Carey to the guest room, that small downstairs bedroom near the kitchen which must have been a maid's room when this was a large family house. There were still police posted outside the house, but only Raglan and the Lieutenant inside.

It was so simple. His mind, he told himself, had never been functioning more clearly. No nonsense about stripping this time; this was not for pleasure. Just be careful to avoid those crimson jets.

The Sergeant wanted to know where he thought he was going. He told him.

Raglan grinned. "You should've raised your hand. A teacher like you ought to know that."

He went to the back-porch toilet, opened and closed its door without going in. Then he went to the kitchen and took the second best knife. The best had been used last night.

It wouldn't take a minute. Then he would be safe, and later when the body was found what could they prove? The others had been out of the room, too.

But as he touched the knife, it began to happen. Something came from the blade up his arm and into his head. He was in a hurry, there was no time—but holding the knife, the color of things began to change . . .

He was half naked when Marshall found him.

Sister Ursula leaned against the jamb of the kitchen door. She felt sick. Marshall and Raglan were both strong men, but they needed help to subdue him. His face was contorted into an unrecognizable mask, like a demon from a Japanese tragedy. She clutched the crucifix of the rosary that hung at her waist and murmured a prayer to the Archangel Michael. For it wasn't the physical strength of the man that frightened her, nor the glint of his knife, but the pure quality of incarnate evil that radiated from him and made the doctrine of possession a real terror.

As she finished her prayer, Marshall's fist connected with his jaw and he crumpled. So did Sister Ursula.

"I don't know what you think of me," Sister Ursula said as Marshall drove her home. (Sister Felicitas was dozing in the back seat.) "I'm afraid I couldn't ever have been a policewoman, after all."

"You'll do," Marshall said. "And if you feel better now, I'd like to run over it with you. I've got to get my brilliant deductions straight for the press."

"The fresh air feels good. Go ahead."

"I've got the sheet business down pat, I think. In ordinary middle-class households, you don't change both sheets every week—Leona never does, I remembered. You put on a clean upper sheet, and the old upper becomes the lower. The other three bedrooms each had one clean sheet—the upper. His had two, upper and lower—therefore his upper sheet had been stained in some unusual way and had to be changed. The hasty bath, probably in the dark, had been careless, and there was some blood left to stain the sheet. Mrs. Carey wouldn't have thought anything of it at the time because she hadn't found the body yet. Right?"

"Perfect, Lieutenant."

"So. But now about Quasimodo. I still don't get it. He's the one it *couldn't* apply to. Either of the others—"

"Yes?"

"Well, who is Quasimodo? He's the Hunchback of Notre Dame. So it could mean the deformed de' Cassis. Who wrote Quasimodo? Victor Hugo. So it could be Hugo Ellis. But it wasn't either. How in heaven's name could it mean Professor Lowe?"

"Remember, Lieutenant: Professor Flecker said this was an allusion that might particularly appeal to me. Now I'm hardly noted

for my devotion to the anticlerical prejudices of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. What is the common meeting ground of my interests and Professor Flecker's?"

"Church liturgy?" Marshall ventured.

"And why was your Quasimodo so named? Because he was born—or found or christened, I forget which—on the Sunday after Easter. Many Sundays, as you may know, are often referred to by the first word of their Introits, the beginning of the proper of the Mass. As the fourth Sunday in Lent is called Laetare Sunday, or the third in Advent Gaudete Sunday, so the Sunday after Easter is known as Quasimodo Sunday, from its Introit. *Quasimodo geniti infantes*. 'As newborn babes.'"

"But I still don't see—"

"The Sunday after Easter," said Sister Ursula, "is more usually referred to as Low Sunday."

"Oh," said Marshall. After a moment he added reflectively, "*The Happy Hypocrite*."

"You see that, too? Beerbohm's story is about a man who assumes a mask of virtue to conceal his depravity. A schizoid allegory. I wonder if Professor Lowe dreamed that he might find the same happy ending."

Marshall drove on a bit in silence. Then he said, "He said a strange thing while you were out."

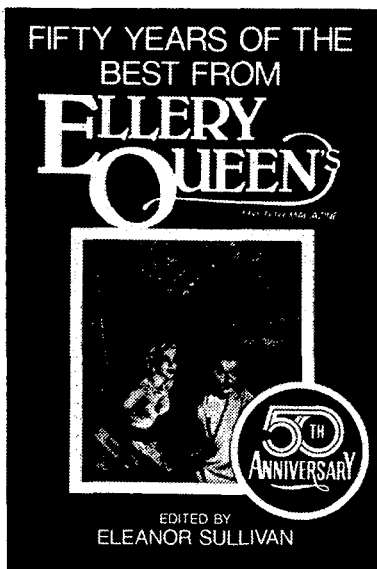
"I feel as though he were already dead," said Sister Ursula. "I want to say, 'God rest his soul.' We should have a special office for the souls of the mad."

"That cues into my story. The boys were taking him away and I said to Rags, 'Well, this is once the insanity plea justifies itself. He'll never see the gas chamber.' And he turned on me—he'd quieted down by then—and said, 'Nonsense, sir! Do you think I would cast doubt on my sanity merely to save my life?'"

"Mercy," said Sister Ursula. At first Marshall thought it was just an exclamation. Then he looked at her face and saw that she was not talking to him.

"Q"

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THE GENTLEMAN FROM PARIS

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Carlton House Hotel
Broadway, New-York
14th April, 1849

My dear brother:

Were my hand more steady, Maurice, or my soul less agitated, I should have written to you before this. *All is safe*: so much I tell you at once. For the rest, I seek sleep in vain, and this is not merely because I find myself a stranger and a foreigner in New-York. Listen and judge.

We discussed, I think, the humiliation that a Frenchman must go to England ere he could take passage in a reliable ship for America. The *Brittania* steam-packet departed from Liverpool on the second of the month and arrived here on the seventeenth. Do not smile, I implore you, when I tell you that my first visit on American soil was to Platt's Saloon, under Wallack's Theatre.

Great God, that voyage!

On my stomach I could hold not even champagne. For one of my height and breadth, I was weak as a child.

"Be good enough," I said to a fur-capped coachman when I had struggled through the horde of Irish immigrants, "to drive me to some fashionable place of refreshment."

The coachman had no difficulty in understanding my English, which pleased me. And how extraordinary are these "saloons"!

The saloon of M. Platt was loud with the thump of hammers cracking ice, which is delivered in large blocks. Though the hand-colored gas-globes and the rose paintings on the front of the bar-counter were as fine as we could see at the Three Provincial Brothers in Paris, I confess that the place did not smell so agreeably. A number

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of gentlemen, wearing hats perhaps a trifle taller than is fashionable at home, lounged at the bar-counter and shouted. I attracted no attention until I called for a sherry cobbler.

One of the bartenders, as they are called in New-York, gave me a sharp glance as he prepared the glass. "Just arrived from the old country, I bet?" said he in no unfriendly tone.

Though it seemed strange to hear France mentioned in this way, I smiled and bowed assent.

"Italian, maybe?" said he.

This bartender, of course, could not know how deadly was the insult.

"Sir," I replied, "I am a Frenchman."

And now in truth he was pleased! His fat face opened and smiled like a distorted, gold-toothed flower.

"Is that so, now!" he exclaimed. "And what might your name be? Unless"—and here his face darkened with that sudden defensiveness and suspicion which, for no reason I can discern, will often strike into American hearts—"unless," said he, "you don't want to give it?"

"Not at all," I assured him earnestly. "I am Armand de Lafayette, at your service."

My dear brother, what an extraordinary effect!

It was silence. All sounds, even the faint whistling of the gas-jets, seemed to die away in that stone-flagged room. Every man along the line of the bar was looking at me. I was conscious only of faces, mostly with whiskers under the chin instead of down the cheekbones, turned to me.

"Well, well, well!" almost sneered the bartender. "You wouldn't be no relation of the *Marquis de Lafayette*, would you?"

It was my turn to be astonished. Though our father has always forbidden us to mention the name of our late uncle, due to his republican sympathies, yet I knew he occupied small place in the history of France and it puzzled me to comprehend how these people had heard of him.

"The late *Marquis de Lafayette*," I was obliged to admit, "was my uncle."

"You better be careful, young feller," suddenly yelled a grimy little man with a pistol buckled under his long coat. "We don't like being diddled, we don't."

"Sir," I replied, taking my bundle of papers from my pocket and whacking them down on the bar-counter, "have the goodness to

examine my credentials. Should you still doubt my identity, we can then debate the matter in any way which pleases you."

"This is furrin writing," shouted the bartender. "I can't read it!"

And then—how sweet was the musical sound on my ear!—I heard a voice addressing me in my own language.

"Perhaps, sir," said the voice, in excellent French and with great stateliness, "I may be able to render you some small service."

The newcomer, a slight man of dark complexion, drawn up under an old shabby cloak of military cut, stood a little way behind me. If I had met him on the boulevards, I might not have found him very prepossessing. He had a wild and wandering eye, with an even wilder shimmer of brandy. He was not very steady on his feet. And yet, Maurice, his manner! It was such that I instinctively raised my hat, and the stranger very gravely did the same.

"And to whom," said I, "have I the honor?"

"I am Thaddeus Perley, sir, at your service."

"Another furriner!" said the grimy little man in disgust.

"I am indeed a foreigner," said M. Perley in English. "A foreigner to this dream-shop. A foreigner to this neighborhood. A foreigner to—" Here he paused, and his eyes acquired an almost frightening blaze of loathing. "Yet I never heard that the speaking or reading of French was so *very* singular an accomplishment."

Imperiously—and yet, it seemed to me, with a certain shrinking nervousness—M. Perley came closer and lifted the bundle of papers.

"Doubtless," he said loftily, "I should not be credited were I to translate these. But here," and he scanned several of the papers, "is a letter of introduction in English. It is addressed to President Zachary Taylor from the American minister at Paris."

Again, my brother, what an enormous silence! It was interrupted by a cry from the bartender, who had snatched the documents from M. Perley.

"Boys, this is no diddle," said he. "This gent is the real thing!"

"He ain't!" thundered the little grimy man with incredulity.

"He is!" said the bartender. "I'll be a son of a roe (*i.e.*, *biche*) if he ain't!"

Well, Maurice, you and I have seen how Paris mobs can change. Americans are even more emotional. In the wink of an eye, hostility became frantic affection. My back was slapped, my hand wrung, my person jammed against the bar by a crowd fighting to order me more refreshment.

The name of Lafayette, again and again, rose like a holy diapason.

In vain I asked why this should be so. They appeared to think I was joking and roared with laughter.

I thought of M. Thaddeus Perley as one who could supply an explanation. But in the first rush toward me, M. Perley had been flung backward. He fell sprawling in some wet stains of tobacco-juice on the floor, and now I could not see him at all. For myself, I was weak from lack of food. A full beaker of whisky, which I was obliged to drink because all eyes were on me, made my head reel. Yet I felt compelled to raise my voice above the clamor.

"Gentlemen," I implored them, "will you hear me?"

"Silence for Lafayette!" said a big but very old man with faded red whiskers. He had tears in his eyes, and he had been humming a catch called *Yankee Doodle*. "Silence for Lafayette!"

"Believe me," said I, "I am full of gratitude for your hospitality. But I have business in New-York, business of immediate and desperate urgency. If you will allow me to pay my reckoning—"

"Your money's no good here, monseer," said the bartender. "You're going to get liquored up good and proper."

"But I have no wish, believe me, to become liquored up—it might well endanger my mission! In effect, I wish to go!"

"Wait a minute," said the little grimy man, with a cunning look. "What is this here business?"

You, Maurice, have called me quixotic. I deny this. You have also called me imprudent. Perhaps you are right; but what choice was left to me?

"Has any gentleman here," I asked, "heard of Madame Thevenet? Madame Thevenet, who lives in number 23 Thomas Street, near Hudson Street?"

I had not, of course, expected an affirmative reply. Yet in addition to one or two snickers at mention of the street, several nodded their heads.

"Old miser woman?" asked a sportif character, who wore checkered trousers.

"I regret, sir, that you correctly describe her. Madame Thevenet is very rich. And I have come here," cried I, "to put right a damnable injustice!"

Struggle as I might, I could not free myself.

"How's that?" asked half a dozen.

"Madame Thevenet's daughter, Mademoiselle Claudine, lives in the worst of poverty at Paris. Madame herself has been brought

here, under some spell, by a devil of a woman calling herself—Gentlemen, I implore you!”

“And I bet you,” cried the little grimy man, “you’re sweet on this daughter what’s-her-name!” He seemed delighted. “Ain’t you, now?”

How, I ask of all Providence, could these people have surprised my secret? Yet I felt obliged to tell the truth.

“I will not conceal from you,” I said, “that I have in truth a high regard for Mademoiselle Claudine. But this lady, believe me, is engaged to a friend of mine, an officer of artillery.”

“Then what do you *get* out of it, eh?” asked the grimy little man, with another cunning look.

The question puzzled me. I could not reply. But the bartender with the gold teeth leaned over to me.

“If you want to see the old Frenchie alive, monseer,” said he, “you’d better git.” (*Sic*, Maurice.) “I heard tell she had a stroke this morning.”

But a dozen voices clamored to keep me there, though this last intelligence sent me into despair. Then up rose the big and very old man with the faded whiskers: indeed, I had never realized how old, because he seemed so hale.

“Which of you was with Washington?” said he, suddenly taking hold of the fierce little man’s neckcloth and speaking with contempt. “Make way for the nephew of Lafayette!”

They cheered me then, Maurice. They hurried me to the door, they begged me to return, they promised they would await me. One glance I sought—nor can I see why—for M. Thaddeus Perley. He was sitting at a table by a pillar, under an open gas-jet. His face whiter than ever, he was still wiping stains of tobacco-juice from his cloak.

Never have I seen a more mournful prospect than Thomas Street, when my cab set me down there. Perhaps it was my state of mind; for if Mme. Thevenet had died without a sou left to her daughter—you conceive it?

The houses of Thomas Street were faced with dingy yellow brick, and a muddy sky hung over the chimney-pots. It had been warm all day, yet I found my spirit intolerably oppressed. Though heaven knows our Parisian streets are dirty enough, we do not allow pigs in them. Except for these, nothing moved in the forsaken street save a blind street musician, with his dog and an instrument called a banjo—but even he was silent, too.

For some minutes, it seemed to me, I plied the knocker at number

23 with hideous noise. Nothing stirred. Finally, one part of the door swung open a little, as for an eye. Whereupon I heard the shifting of a floor-bolt and both doors were swung open.

Need I say that facing me stood the woman whom we have agreed to call Mademoiselle Jezebel?

She said to me: "And then, M. Armand?"

"Madame Thevenet!" cried I. "She is still alive?"

"She is alive," replied my companion, looking up at me from under the lids of her greenish eyes. "But she is completely paralyzed."

I have never denied, Maurice, that Mlle. Jezebel has a certain attractiveness. She is not old or even middle-aged. Were it not that her complexion is as muddy as was the sky above us then, she would have been pretty.

"And as for Claudine," I said to her, "the daughter to Madame—"

"You have come too late, M. Armand."

And well I remember that at this moment there rose up, in the mournful street outside, the tinkle of the banjo played by the street musician. It moved closer, playing a popular catch whose words run something thus:

"Oh, I come from Alabama

With my banjo on my knee;

I depart for Louisiana

My Susannah for to see."

Across the lips of mademoiselle flashed a smile of peculiar quality, like a razor-cut before the blood comes. "Gold," she whispered. "Ninety thousand persons, one hears, have gone to seek it. Go to California, M. Armand. It is the only place you will find gold."

This tune, they say, is a merry tune. It did not seem so as the dreary twanging faded away. Mlle. Jezebel, with her muddy blonde hair parted in the middle and drawn over her ears after the best fashion, faced me implacably. Her greenish eyes were wide open. Her old brown-taffeta dress, full at the bust, narrow at the waist, rustled its wide skirts as she glided a step forward.

"Have the kindness," I said, "to stand aside. I wish to enter."

Hitherto in my life I had seen her docile and meek.

"You are no relative," she said. "I will not allow you to enter."

"In that case, I regret, I must."

"If you have ever spoken one kind word to *me*," whispered mademoiselle, looking up from under her eyelids, and with her breast heaving, "one gesture of love—that is to say, of affection—you might have shared five million francs."

"Stand aside, I say!"

"As it is, you prefer a doll-faced consumptive at Paris. She be it!"

I was raging, Maurice, I confess it—yet I drew myself up with coldness. "You refer, perhaps, to Claudine Thevenet?"

"And to whom else?"

"I might remind you, mademoiselle, that the lady is pledged to my good friend, Lieutenant Delage. I have forgotten her."

"Have you?" asked our Jezebel, with her eyes on my face and a strange hungry look in them. "Well, she will die. Unless you can solve a mystery."

"A mystery?"

"I should not have said mystery, M. Armand. Because it is impossible of all solution. It is an Act of God!"

Up to this time, the glass-fronted doors of the vestibule had stood open behind her against a darkness of closed shutters in the house. There breathed out of it an odor of unswept carpets, a sourness of stale living. Someone was approaching, carrying a lighted candle.

"Who speaks?" called a man's voice, shaky but as French as Mlle. Jezebel's. "Who speaks concerning an Act of God?"

I stepped across the threshold. Mademoiselle, who never left my side, immediately closed and locked the front doors. As the candle-glimmer moved still closer in gloom, I could have shouted for joy to see the man who (as I correctly guessed) I had come to meet.

"You are M. Duroc, the lawyer!" I said. "You are my brother's friend!"

M. Duroc held the candle higher, to inspect me.

He was a big, heavy man who seemed to sag in all his flesh. In compensation for his bald head, the greyish-brown moustache flowed down and parted into two hairy fans of beard on either side of his chin. He looked at me through oval gold-rimmed spectacles—in a friendly way, but yet frightened. His voice was deep and gruff, clipping the syllables, despite his fright.

"And you—" *clip-clip*; the candle holder trembled—"you are Armand de Lafayette. I had expected you by the steam-packet today. Well, you are here. On a fool's errand, I regret."

"But why?" (And I shouted it at him, Maurice.)

I looked at mademoiselle, who was faintly smiling.

"M. Duroc!" I protested. "You wrote to my brother. You said you had persuaded madame to repent of her harshness toward her daughter!"

"Was that your duty?" asked the Jezebel, looking full at M. Duroc with her greenish eyes. "Was that your right?"

"I am a man of law," said M. Duroc. The deep monosyllables rapped, in ghostly bursts, through his parted beard. "I am correct. Very correct! And yet—"

"Who nursed her?" asked the Jezebel. "Who soothed her, fed her, wore her filthy clothes, calmed her tempers, endured her interminable abuse? *I did!*"

And yet, all the time she was speaking, this woman kept sidling and sliding against me, brushing my side, as though she would make sure of my presence there.

"Well!" said the lawyer. "It matters little now! This mystery—"

You may well believe that all these cryptic remarks, as well as reference to a mystery or an Act of God, had driven me almost frantic. I demanded to know what he meant.

"Last night," said M. Duroc, "a certain article disappeared."

"Well? Well?"

"It disappeared," said M. Duroc, drawn up like a grenadier, "but it could not conceivably have disappeared. I myself swear this! Our only suggestions as to how it might have disappeared are a toy rabbit and a barometer."

"Sir," I said, "I do not wish to be discourteous. But—"

"Am I mad, you ask?"

I bowed. If any man can manage at once to look sagging and uncertain, yet stately and dignified, M. Duroc managed it then. And dignity won, I think.

"Sir," he replied, gesturing with the candle toward the rear of the house, "Madame Thevenet lies there in her bed. She is paralyzed. She can move only her eyes and partially the lips, without speech. Do you wish to see her?"

"If I am permitted."

"Yes. That would be correct. Accompany me."

And I saw the poor old woman, Maurice. Call her harridan if you like.

It was a square room of good size, whose shutters had remained closed and locked for years. Can one smell rust? In that room with faded green wallpaper I felt I could.

One solitary candle did little more than dispel shadow. It burned atop the mantelpiece well opposite the foot of the bed, and a shaggy man, whom I afterward learned to be a police officer, sat in a green-

upholstered armchair by an unlighted coal fire in the fireplace grate, picking his teeth with a knife.

"If you please, Dr. Harding!" M. Duroc called softly in English.

The long and lean American doctor, who had been bending over the bed so as to conceal from our sight the head and shoulders of Madame Thevenet, turned round. But his cadaverous body—in such fashion were madame's head and shoulders propped up against pillows—still concealed her face.

"Has there been any change?" persisted M. Duroc in English.

"There has been no change," replied the dark-complexioned Dr. Harding, "except for the worse."

"Do you want her to be moved?"

"There has never been any necessity," said the physician, picking up his beaver hat from the bed. He spoke drily. "However, if you want to learn anything more about the toy rabbit or the barometer, you should hurry. The lady will die in a matter of hours, probably less."

And he stood to one side.

It was a heavy bed with four posts and a canopy. The bed-curtains, of some dullish-green material, were closely drawn on every side except the long side by which we saw Madame Thevenet in profile. Lean as a post, rigid, the strings of her cotton nightcap tightly tied under her chin, Madame Thevenet lay propped up there. But one eye rolled toward us, and it rolled horribly.

Up to this time the woman we call the Jezebel had said little. She chose this moment again to come brushing against my side. Her greenish eyes, lids half closed, shone in the light of M. Duroc's candle. What she whispered was: "You don't really hate me, do you?"

Maurice, I make a pause here.

Since I wrote the sentence, I put down my pen, and pressed my hands over my eyes, and once more I thought. But let me try again.

I spent just two hours in the bedroom of Madame Thevenet. At the end of the time—oh, you shall hear why!—I rushed out of that bedroom, and out of number 23 Thomas Street, like the maniac I was.

The streets were full of people, of carriages, of omnibuses, at early evening. Knowing noplacé of refuge save the saloon from which I had come, I gave its address to a cab-driver. Since I had still swallowed no food, I may have been light-headed. Yet I wished to pour

out my heart to the friends who had bidden me return there. And where were they now?

A new group, all new, lounged against the bar-counter under brighter gaslight and brighter paint. Of all those who smote me on the back and cheered, none remained save the ancient giant who had implied friendship with General Washington. *He*, alas, lay helplessly drunk with his head near a sawdust spitting-box. Nevertheless, I was so moved that I took the liberty of thrusting a handful of bank-notes into his pocket. He alone remained.

Wait, there was another!

I do not believe he had remained there because of me. Yet M. Thaddeus Perley, still sitting alone at the little table by the pillar, with the open gas-jet above, stared vacantly at the empty glass in his hand.

He had named himself a foreigner; he was probably French. That was as well. For, as I lurched against the table, I was befuddled and all English had fled my wits.

"Sir," said I, "will you permit a madman to share your table?"

M. Perley gave a great start, as though roused out of thought. He was now sober: this I saw. Indeed, his shiver and haggard face were due to lack of stimulant rather than too much of it.

"Sir," he stammered, getting to his feet, "I shall be—I shall be honored by your company."

Automatically he opened his mouth to call for a waiter; his hand went to his pocket; he stopped.

"No, no, no!" said I. "If you insist, M. Perley, you may pay for the second bottle. The first is mine. I am sick at heart, and I would speak with a gentleman."

At these last words M. Perley's whole expression changed. He sat down and gave me a grave, courtly nod. His eyes, which were his most expressive feature, studied my face and my disarray.

"You are ill, M. de Lafayette," he said. "Have you so soon come to grief in this—this *civilized* country?"

"I have come to grief, yes. But not through civilization or the lack of it." And I banged my fist on the table. "I have come to grief, M. Perley, through miracles or magic. I have come to grief with a problem which no man's ingenuity can solve!"

M. Perley looked at me in a strange way. But someone had brought a bottle of brandy, with its accessories. M. Perley's trembling hand slopped a generous allowance into my glass, and an even more generous one into his own.

"That is very curious," he remarked, eyeing the glass. "A murder, was it?"

"No. But a valuable document has disappeared. The most thorough search by the police cannot find it."

Touch him anywhere, and he flinched. M. Perley, for some extraordinary reason, appeared to think I was mocking him.

"A document, you say?" His laugh was a trifle unearthly. "Come, now. Was it by any chance—a letter?"

"No, no! It was a will. Three large sheets of parchment, of the size you call foolscap. Listen!"

And as M. Perley added water to his brandy and gulped down about a third of it, I leaned across the table.

"Madame Thevenet, of whom you may have heard me speak in this cafe, was an invalid. But, until the early hours of this morning, she was not bed-ridden. She could move and walk about her room, and so on. She had been lured away from Paris and her family by a green-eyed woman called the Jezebel.

"But a kindly lawyer of this city, M. Duroc, believed that madame suffered and had a bad conscience about her own daughter. Last night, despite the Jezebel, he persuaded madame at last to sign a will leaving all her money to this daughter.

"And the daughter, Claudine, is in mortal need of it! From my brother and myself, who have more than enough, she will not accept a sou. Her affianced, Lieutenant Delage, is as poor as she. But, unless she leaves France for Switzerland, she will die. I will not conceal from you that Claudine suffers from that dread disease we politely call consumption."

M. Perley stopped with his glass again halfway to his mouth.

He believed me now, I sensed it. Yet under the dark hair, tumbled on his forehead, his face had gone as white as his neat, mended shirt-frill.

"So very little a thing is money!" he whispered. "So very little a thing!"

And he lifted the glass and drained it.

"You do not think I am mocking you, sir?"

"No, no!" said M. Perley, shading his eyes with one hand. "I knew myself of one such case. She is dead. Pray continue."

"Last night, I repeat, Madame Thevenet changed her mind. When M. Duroc paid his weekly evening visit with the news that I should arrive today, madame fairly chattered with eagerness and a kind of terror. Death was approaching, she said; she had a presentiment."

As I spoke, Maurice, there returned to me the image of that shadowy, arsenic-green bedroom in the shuttered house, and what M. Duroc had told me.

"Madame," I continued, "cried out to M. Duroc that he must bolt the bedroom door. She feared the Jezebel, who lurked but said nothing. M. Duroc drew up to her bedside a portable writing-desk, with two good candles.

"For a long time, madame spoke, pouring out contrition, self-abasement, the story of an unhappy marriage, all of which M. Duroc, sweating with embarrassment, was obliged to write down until it covered three large parchment sheets.

"But it was done, M. Perley!

"The will, in effect, left everything to her daughter, Claudine. It revoked a previous will by which all had been left—and this can be done in French law, as we both know—to Jezebel of the muddy complexion and the muddy yellow hair.

"Well, then!

"M. Duroc sallies out into the street, where he finds two sober fellows, who come in. Madame signs the will, M. Duroc sands it, and the two men from the street affix their signatures as witnesses. Then they are gone. M. Duroc folds the will lengthways and prepares to put it into his carpetbag. Now, M. Perley, mark what follows!

"'No, no, no!' cries madame, with the shadow of her peaked night-cap wagging on the locked shutters beyond. 'I wish to keep it—for this one night!'

"'For this one night, madame?' asks M. Duroc.

"'I wish to press it against my heart,' says Madame Thevenet. 'I wish to read it once, twice, a thousand times! M. Duroc, what time is it?'

"Whereupon he takes out his gold repeater and opens it. To his astonishment, it is one o'clock in the morning. Yet he touches the spring of the repeater and its pulse-beat rings one.

"'M. Duroc,' pleads Madame Thevenet, 'remain here with me for the rest of the night!'

"'Madame!' cries M. Duroc, shocked to the very fans of his beard. 'That would not be correct.'

"'Yes, you are right,' says madame. And never, swears the lawyer, has he seen her less bleary of eye, more alive with wit and cunning, more the great lady of ruin, than there in that green and shadowy and foul-smelling room.

"Yet this very fact puts her in more and more terror of the Jezebel, who is never seen. She points to M. Duroc's carpetbag.

"I think you have much work to do, dear sir?"

"M. Duroc groaned. 'The Good Lord knows that I have!'

"'Outside the only door of this room,' says madame, 'there is a small dressing-room. Set up your writing-desk beside the door there, so that no one may enter without your knowledge. Do your work there—you shall have a lamp or many candles. Do it,' shrieks madame, 'for the sake of Claudine and for the sake of an old friendship!'

"Very naturally, M. Duroc hesitated.

"'*She* will be hovering,' pleads Madame Thevenet, pressing the will against her breast. '*This* I shall read and read and read, and sanctify with my tears. If I find I am falling asleep,' and here the old lady looked cunning, 'I shall hide it. But no matter! Even *she* cannot penetrate through locked shutters and a guarded door.'

"Well, in fine, the lawyer at length yielded.

"He set up his writing-desk against the very doorpost outside the door. When he last saw madame before closing the door, he saw her in profile with the green bed-curtains drawn except on that side, propped up, with a tall candle burning on a table at her right hand.

"Ah, that night! I think I see M. Duroc at his writing-desk, as he has told me, in an airless dressing-room where no clock ticked. I see him at times removing his oval spectacles to press his smarting eyes. I see him returning to his legal papers, while his pen scratched through the wicked hours of the night.

"He heard nothing, or virtually nothing, until five o'clock in the morning. Then, which turned him cold, he heard a cry which he described as being like that of a deaf-mute.

"The communicating door had not been bolted on Madame Thevenet's side, in case she needed help. M. Duroc rushed into the other room.

"On the table, at madame's right hand, the tall candle had burnt down to a flattish mass of wax, over which still hovered a faint blueish flame. Madame herself lay rigid in her peaked nightcap. That revival of spirit last night, or remorse in her bitter heart, had brought on the last paralysis. Though M. Duroc tried to question her, she could move only her eyes.

"Then M. Duroc noticed that the will, which she had clutched as a doomed religious might clutch a crucifix, was not in her hand or on the bed. 'Where is the will?' he shouted at her, as though she were deaf, too. 'Where is the will?'

"Madame Thevenet's eyes fixed on him. Then they moved down and looked steadily at a trumpery toy—a rabbit, perhaps four inches high, made of pink velour or the like—which lay on the bed. Again she looked at M. Duroc, as though to emphasize this. Then her eyes rolled, this time with dreadful effort, toward a large barometer, shaped like a warming-pan, which hung on the wall beside the door. Three times she did this before the blueish candle-flame flickered and went out."

And I, Armand de Lafayette, paused here in my recital to M. Perley.

Again I became aware that I was seated in a garish saloon, swilling brandy, amid loud talk that beat the air. There was a thumping noise from the theater above our heads and faint strains of music.

"The will," I said, "was not stolen. Not even the Jezebel could have melted through locked shutters or a guarded door. The will was not hidden, because no inch of the room remains unsearched. *Yet the will is gone!*"

I threw a glance across the table at M. Perley.

To me, I am sure, the brandy had given strength and steadied my nerves. With M. Perley I was not so sure. He was a little flushed. That slightly wild look, which I had observed before, had crept up especially into one eye, giving his whole face a somewhat lopsided appearance. Yet all his self-confidence had returned. He gave me a little crooked smile. I struck the table. "Do you honor me with your attention, M. Perley?"

"What song the Sirens sang," he said to me, "or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond *all* conjecture."

"They are beyond *my* conjecture!" I cried. "And so is this!"

M. Perley extended his hand, spread the fingers, and examined them as one who owns the universe. "It is some little time," he remarked, "since I have concerned myself with these trifles." His eyes retreated into a dream. "Yet I have given some trifling aid, in the past, to the prefect of the Parisian police."

"You are a Frenchman! I knew it! And the police?" Seeing his lofty look, I added: "As an amateur, understood?"

"Understood!" Then his delicate hand—it would be unjust to call it claw-like—shot across the table and fastened on my arm. The strange eyes burned toward my face. "A little more detail!" he pleaded humbly. "A little more, I beg of you! This woman, for instance, you call the Jezebel?"

"It was she who met me at the house."

"And then?"

I described for him my meeting with the Jezebel, with M. Duroc, and our entrance to the sickroom, where the shaggy police-officer sat in the armchair and the saturnine doctor faced us from beside the bed.

"This woman," I exclaimed, with the room vividly before my eyes as I described it, "seems to have conceived for me—forgive me—a kind of passion. No doubt it was due to some idle compliments I once paid her at Paris.

"As I have explained, the Jezebel is *not* unattractive, even if she would only—again forgive me—wash her hair. Nevertheless, when once more she brushed my side and whispered, 'You don't really hate me, do you?' I felt little less than horror. It seemed to be that in some fashion I was responsible for the whole tragedy.

"While we stood beside the bed, M. Duroc the lawyer poured out the story I have recounted. There lay the poor paralytic, and confirmed it with her eyes. The toy rabbit, a detestable pink color, lay in its same position on the bed. Behind me, hung against the wall by the door, was the large barometer.

"Apparently for my benefit, Madame Thevenet again went through her dumb show with imploring eyes. She would look at the rabbit. Next—as M. Duroc had not mentioned—she would roll her eyes all round her, for some desperate yet impenetrable reason, before fixing her gaze on the barometer.

"It meant—what?"

"The lawyer spoke then. 'More light!' gulped out M. Duroc. 'If you must have closed shutters and windows, then let us at least have more light!'

"The Jezebel glided out to fetch candles. During M. Duroc's explanation he had several times mentioned my name. At first mention of it, the shaggy police-officer jumped and put away his clasp-knife. He beckoned to the physician, Dr. Harding, who went over for a whispered conference.

"Whereupon the police-officer sprang up. 'Mr. Lafayette!' And he swung my hand pompously. 'If I'd known it was you, Mr. Lafayette, I wouldn'ta sat there like a bump on a log.'

"'You are an officer of police, sir,' said I. 'Can you think of no explanation?'

"He shook his head.

"These people are Frenchies, Mr. Lafayette, and you're an Amer-

ican,' he said, with somewhat conspicuous lack of logic. 'If they're telling the truth—'

"Let us assume that!"

"I can't tell you where the old lady's will is,' he stated positively. 'But I can tell you where it ain't. It ain't hidden in this room!'

"But surely—' I began in despair.

"At this moment the Jezebel, her brown-taffeta dress rustling, glided back into the room with a handful of candles and a tin box of the new-style Lucifer matches. She lighted several candles, sticking them on any surface in their own grease.

"There were one or two fine pieces of furniture, but the mottled-marble tops were chipped and stained, the gilt sides cracked. There were a few mirrors, creating mimic spectral life. I saw a little more clearly the faded green paper of the walls, and what I perceived to be the partly open door of a cupboard. The floor was of bare boards.

"All this while I was conscious of two pairs of eyes—the imploring gaze of Madame Thevenet and the amorous gaze of the Jezebel. One or the other I could have endured, but both together seemed to suffocate me.

"Mr. Duroc here,' said the shaggy police-officer, clapping the distressed advocate on the shoulder, 'sent a messenger in a cab at half past five this morning. And what time did we get here? I ask you and I tell you! Six o'clock!"

"Then he shook his finger at me in a kind of pride and fury of efficiency. 'Why, Mr. Lafayette, there's been fourteen men in this room from six this morning until just before you got here!"

"To search for Madame Thevenet's will, you mean?"

"The shaggy man nodded portentously, and folded his arms.

"Floor's solid.' He stamped on the bare boards. 'Walls and ceiling? Nary an inch missed.'

"But Madame Thevenet,' I persisted, 'was not a complete invalid until this morning. She could move about. If she became afraid of—the name of the Jezebel choked me—if she became afraid and *did* hide the will—'

"Where'd she hide it? Tell me."

"In the furniture, then?"

"Cabinet-maker's been in, Mr. Lafayette. No secret compartments."

"In one of the mirrors?"

"Took the back of 'em off. No will hid there."

"Up the chimney!" I cried.

"‘Sent a chimney-sweep up there,’ replied my companion in a ruminating way. Each time I guessed, he would leer at me in friendly and complacent challenge. ‘Ye—es, I reckon we’re pretty smart. But we didn’t find no will.’

"The pink rabbit also seemed to leer from the bed. I saw madame’s eyes. Once again, as a desperate mind will fasten on trifles, I observed the strings of the nightcap beneath her scrawny chin. But I looked again at the toy rabbit.

"‘Has it occurred to you,’ I said triumphantly, ‘to examine the bed and bedstead of Madame Thevenet herself?’

"‘My shaggy friend went to her bedside.

"‘Poor old woman,’ he said. He spoke as though she were already a corpse. Then he turned round. ‘We lifted her out, just as gentle as a newborn babe—didn’t we, ma’am? No hollow bedposts! Nothing in the canopy! Nothing in the frame or the featherbeds or the curtains or the bedclothes!’

"Suddenly he became angry, as though he wished to be rid of the whole matter. ‘And it ain’t in the toy rabbit,’ he said, ‘because you can see we slit it up, if you look close. And it ain’t in that barometer there. It just—ain’t here.’

"There was a silence as heavy as the dusty, hot air of this room.

"‘It is here,’ murmured M. Duroc in his gruff voice. ‘It must be here!’

"The Jezebel stood there meekly, with downcast eyes.

"And I, in my turn, confess that I lost my head. I stalked over to the barometer and tapped it. Its needle, which already indicated ‘Rain, cold,’ moved still farther toward that point.

"I was not insane enough to hit it with my fist. But I crawled on the floor, in search of a secret hiding-place. I felt along the wall. The police-officer—who kept repeating that nobody must touch anything and he would take no responsibility until he went off duty at something o’clock—I ignored.

"What at length gave me pause was the cupboard, already thoroughly searched. In the cupboard hung a few withered dresses and gowns, as though they had shriveled along with Madame Thevenet’s body. But on the shelf of the cupboard—

"On the shelf stood a great number of perfume bottles: even today, I fear, many of our countrymen think perfume a substitute for water and soap, and the state of madame’s hands would have confirmed this. *But*, on the shelf were a few dusty novels. There was a crumpled and begrimed copy of yesterday’s New-York *Sun*. This newspaper

did not contain a will, but it did contain a black beetle, which ran out across my hand.

"In a disgust past describing, I flung down the beetle and stamped on it. I closed the cupboard door, acknowledging defeat. Madame Thevenet's will had vanished. And at the same second, in that dim green room—still badly lighted, with only a few more candles—two voices cried out.

"One was my own voice:

"In God's name, where is it?"

"The other was the deep voice of M. Duroc:

"Look at that woman! She knows!"

"And he meant the Jezebel.

"M. Duroc, with his beard-fans atremble, was pointing to a mirror—a little blurred, as these mirrors were. Our Jezebel had been looking into the mirror, her back turned to us. Now she dodged, as at a stone thrown.

"With good poise our Jezebel writhed this movement into a curtsy, turning to face us. But not before I also had seen that smile—like a razor-cut before the blood comes—as well as full knowledge, mocking knowledge, shining out of wide-open eyes in the mirror.

"'You spoke to me, M. Duroc?' She murmured the reply, also in French.

"'Listen to me!' the lawyer said formally. 'This will is *not* missing. It is in this room. You were not here last night. Something has made you guess the truth. You know where it is.'

"'Are you unable to find it?' asked the Jezebel in surprise.

"'Stand back, young man!' M. Duroc said to me, 'I ask you something, mademoiselle, in the name of justice.'

"'Ask!' said the Jezebel.

"'If Claudine Thevenet inherits the money to which she is entitled, you will be well paid—yes, overpaid! You know Claudine. You know that!'

"'I know it.'

"'But if the new will be *not* found,' said M. Duroc, again waving me back, 'then you inherit everything. And Claudine will die. For it will be assumed—'

"'Yes!' said the Jezebel, with one hand pressed against her breast. 'You yourself, M. Duroc, testify that all night a candle was burning at madame's bedside. Well! The poor woman, whom *I* loved and cherished, repented of her ingratitude toward me. She burnt this

new will at the candle-flame; she crushed its ashes to powder and blew them away!

"Is that true?" cried M. Duroc.

"They will assume it," smiled the Jezebel, 'as you say.' She looked at me. 'And for you, M. Armand!'

"She glided closer. I can only say that I saw her eyes uncovered—or, if you wish to put it so, her soul and flesh together.

"I would give you everything on earth," she said. 'But I will not give you the doll-face in Paris.'

"Listen to me!" I said to her, so agitated that I seized her shoulders. 'You are out of your senses! You cannot give Claudine to me—she will marry another man!'

"And do you think that matters to me," asked the Jezebel with her green eyes full on mine, 'as long as you still love her?'

"There was a small crash as someone dropped a knife on the floor.

"We three, I think, had completely forgotten that we were not alone. There were two spectators, although they did not comprehend our speech.

"The saturnine Dr. Harding now occupied the green armchair. His long thin legs, in tight black trousers with strap under the boot-instep, were crossed and looked spidery; his high beaver hat glimmered on his head. The police-officer, who was picking his teeth with a knife when I first saw him, had now dropped the knife when he tried to trim his nails.

"But both men sensed the atmosphere. Both were alert, feeling out with the tentacles of their nerves. The police-officer shouted at me. 'What's this gabble?' he said. 'What's a-gitting in your head?'

"Grotesquely, it was that word 'head' which gave me my inspiration.

"The nightcap!" I exclaimed in English.

"What nightcap?"

"For the nightcap of Madame Thevenet had a peak; it was large; it was tightly tied under the chin; it might well conceal a flat-pressed document which—but you understand. The police-officer, dull-witted as he appeared, grasped the meaning in a flash. And how I wished I had never spoken! For the fellow meant well, but he was not gentle.

"As I raced round the curtained sides of the bed, the police-officer was holding a candle in one hand and tearing off madame's nightcap with the other. He found no will there, no document at all—only straggly wisps of hair on a skull grown ancient before its time.

"Madame Thevenet had been a great lady once. It must have been the last humiliation. Two tears overflowed her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She lay propped up there in a nearly sitting position, but something seemed to wrench inside her. And she closed her eyes forever.

"And the Jezebel laughed.

"That is the end of my story. That is why I rushed out of the house like a madman. The will has vanished as though by magic—or is it still there by magic? In any case, you find me at this table—grubby and disheveled and much ashamed."

For a little time after I had finished my narrative to M. Perley in the saloon, it seemed to me that the bar-counter was a trifle quieter. But a faint stamping continued from the theater above our heads. Then it all was hushed, until a chorus rose to a tinkle of many banjos.

"Oh, I come from Alabama

With my banjo on my knee;

I depart for Louisiana—"

Enough! The song soon died away, and M. Thaddeus Perley did not even hear it.

He sat looking down into an empty glass, so that I could not see his face. "Sir," he remarked almost bitterly, "you are a man of good heart. I am glad to be of service in a problem so trifling as this."

"Trifling!"

His voice was a little husky, but not slurred. His hand turned the glass round and round.

"Will you permit two questions?" asked M. Perley.

"Two questions? Ten thousand!"

"More than two will be unnecessary." Still M. Perley did not look up. "This toy rabbit, of which so much was made: I would know its exact position on the bed?"

"It was almost at the foot of the bed, and about the middle in a crossways direction."

"Ah, so I had imagined. Were the three sheets of parchment forming the will written upon two sides or upon only one?"

"I had not told you, M. Perley. But M. Duroc said upon one side only."

M. Perley raised his head. His face was now flushed and distorted with drink, his eye grown wild. In his cups he was as proud as Satan,

and as disdainful of others' intelligence, yet he spoke with dignity, and with careful clearness.

"It is ironic, M. de Lafayette, that I should tell you how to lay your hand on the missing will and the elusive money, since, upon my word, I have never been able to perform a like service for myself." And he smiled, as at some secret joke. "Perhaps," he added, "it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault."

I could only look at him in bewilderment.

"Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain! A little *too* self-evident!"

"You mock me, sir. I will not—"

"Take me as I am," said M. Perley, whacking the foot of the glass on the table, "or leave me. Besides"—here his wandering eye encountered a list of steam-sailings pasted against the wall—"I leave tomorrow by the *Parnassus* for England, and then for France."

"I meant no offense, M. Perley! If you have knowledge, speak!"

"Madame Thevenet," he said, carefully pouring himself more brandy, "hid the will in the middle of the night. Does it puzzle you that she took such precautions to hide the will? But the element of the *outré* must always betray itself. The Jezebel must not find that will! Yet Madame Thevenet trusted nobody—not even the worthy physician who attended her. If Madame were to die of a stroke, the police would be there and must soon, she was sure, discover her simple device. Even if she were paralyzed, it would ensure the presence of other persons in the room to act as unwitting guards.

"Your cardinal error," M. Perley continued dispassionately, "was one of ratiocination—rather, of inaccurate ratiocination. You tell me that Madame Thevenet, to give you a hint, looked fixedly at some point near the foot of the bed. Why do you assume that she was looking at the toy rabbit?"

"Because," I replied hotly, "the toy rabbit was the only object she could have looked at!"

"Pardon me, but it was *not*. You several times informed me that the bed-curtains were closely drawn together on three sides. They were drawn on all but the 'long' side toward the door. Therefore, the ideal reasoner, without having seen the room, may safely say that the curtains were drawn together at the foot of the bed?"

"Yes, true!"

"After looking fixedly at this point represented by the toy, Madame Thevenet then 'rolls her eyes all round her'—in your phrase. May we assume that she wishes the curtains to be drawn back, so that she may see something *beyond* the bed?"

"It is—possible, yes!"

"It is more than possible, as I shall demonstrate. Let us direct our attention, briefly, to the incongruous phenomenon of the barometer on another wall. The barometer indicates 'Rain, cold.' "

Here M. Perley's thin shoulders drew together under the old military cloak.

"Well," he said, "the cold is on its way. Yet this day, for April, has been warm outside, and indoors oppressively hot?"

"Yes! Of course!"

"You yourself," continued M. Perley, inspecting his fingernails, "told me what was directly opposite the foot of the bed. Let us suppose that the bed-curtains are drawn open. Madame Thevenet, in her nearly seated position, is looking *downward*. What would she have seen?"

"The fireplace!" I cried. "The grate of the fireplace!"

"Already we have a link with the weather. And what, as you have specifically informed me, was in the grate of the fireplace?"

"An unlighted coal fire!"

"Exactly. And what is essential for the composition of such a fire? We need coal, we need kindling wood, but primarily and above all we need—"

"*Paper!*" I cried.

"In the cupboard of that room," said M. Perley, with his disdainful little smile, "was a very crumpled and begrimed—mark that, not dusty—copy of *yesterday's New-York Sun*. To light fires is the most common, and indeed the best, use for our daily press. The copy had been used to build yesterday's fire. But something else, during the night, was substituted for it. You yourself remarked the extraordinarily dirty state of Madame Thevenet's hands."

M. Perley swallowed the brandy and his flush deepened. "Sir," he said loudly, "you will find the will crumpled up, with the ends most obviously protruding under the coal and wood in the fireplace grate. Even had anyone taken the fire to pieces, he would have found only what appeared to be dirty blank paper, written side undermost, which could never be a valuable will. It was too self-evident to be seen. —Now, go!"

"Go?" I echoed stupidly.

M. Perley rose from his chair. "Go, I say!" he shouted, with an even wilder eye. "The Jezebel could not light that fire. It was too warm, for one thing, and all day there were police-officers with instruction that an outsider must touch nothing. But now? *Madame*

Thevenet kept warning you that the fire must not be lighted or the will would be destroyed!"

"Will you await me here?" I called over my shoulder.

"Yes, yes! And perhaps there will be peace for the wretched girl with—with the lung-trouble."

Even as I ran out of the door I saw him, grotesque and pitiful, slump across the table. Hope, rising and surging, seemed to sweep me along like the crack of the cabman's whip. But when I reached my destination, hope receded.

The shaggy police-officer was just descending the front steps.

"None of us coming back here, Mr. Lafayette!" he called cheerily. "Old Mrs. What's-her-name went and burnt that will at a candle last night. —Here, what's o'clock?"

The front door was unlocked. I raced through that dark house and burst into the rear bedroom.

The corpse still lay in the big, gloomy bed. Every candle had flickered almost down to its socket. The police-officer's clasp-knife, forgotten since he had dropped it, still lay on the bare boards. But the Jezebel was there.

She knelt on the hearth with the tin box of Lucifer matches she had brought there earlier.

The match sputtered, a blueish flame; I saw her eagerness; she held the match to the grate.

"A Lucifer," I said, "in the hand of a Jezebel!" And I struck her away from the grate, so that she reeled against a chair and fell. Large coals and small rattled down in puffs of dust as I plunged my hands into the unlighted fire. Little sticks, sawed sticks; and I found it there—crumpled parchment-sheets, but incontestably madame's will.

"M. Duroc!" I called. "M. Duroc!"

You and I, my brother Maurice, have fought the Citizen-King with bayonets, as we now fight the upstart Bonapartist—we need not be ashamed of tears. I confess, then, that the tears overran my eyes and blinded me. I scarcely saw M. Duroc as he hurried into the room.

Certainly I did not see the Jezebel stealthily pick up the police-officer's knife. I noticed nothing at all until she flew at me, and stabbed me in the back.

Peace, my brother: I have assured you all is well. At the time, faith, I was not much conscious of any hurt. I bade M. Duroc, who was trembling, to wrench out the knife; I borrowed his roomy great-

coat to hide the blood; I must hurry back to that little table under the gas-jet.

I planned it all on my way back. M. Perley, apparently a stranger in this country, disliked it and was evidently very poor even in France. But *we* are not precisely paupers. Even with his intense pride, he could not refuse—for such a service—a sum which would comfort him for the rest of his life. Back I plunged into the saloon, and hurried down it. Then I stopped. The little round table by the pillar, under the flaring gas-jet, was empty.

How long I stood there I cannot tell. The back of my shirt, which at first had seemed full of blood, now stuck to the borrowed greatcoat. All of a sudden I caught sight of the fat-faced bartender with the gold teeth who had been on service that afternoon and had returned now. As a mark of respect, he came out from behind the bar-counter to greet me.

"Where is the gentleman who was sitting at that table?"

I pointed to it. My voice, in truth, must have sounded so hoarse and strange that he mistook it for anger.

"Don't you worry about that, monseer!" said he reassuringly. "That's been tended to! We threw the drunken tramp out of here!"

"You threw—"

"Right bang in the gutter. Had to crawl along in it before he could stand up." My bartender's face was pleased and vicious. "Ordered a bottle of best brandy, and couldn't pay for it." The face changed again. "Goddelmighty, monseer, what's wrong?"

"I ordered that brandy."

"*He* didn't say so when the waiter brought me over. Just looked me up and down, crazylike, and said a gentleman would give his I.O.U. Gentleman!"

"M. Perley," I said, restraining an impulse to kill him, "is a friend of mine. He departs for France early tomorrow morning. Where is his hotel? Where can I find him?"

"Perley!" sneered my companion. "That ain't even his real name, I heard tell. Gits high-and-mighty ideas from upper Broadway. But his real name's on the I.O.U."

A surge of hope, once more, almost blinded me. "Did you keep that I.O.U.?"

"Yes, I kepp it," growled the bartender, fishing in his pocket. "God knows why, but I kepp it."

And at last, Maurice, I triumphed!

True, I collapsed from my wound, and the fever would not let me

remember that I must be at the dock when the *Parnassus* steampacket departed from New-York next morning. I must remain here, shut up in a hotel room and unable to sleep at night, until I can take ship for home. But where I failed, you can succeed. He was to leave on the morrow by the *Parnassus* for England, and then for France—so he told me. You can find him—in six months at the most. In six months, I give you my word, he will be out of misery forever!

"I.O.U.," reads the little slip, "*for one bottle of your best brandy, forty-five cents. Signed: Edgar A. Poe.*"

I remain, Maurice,
Your affectionate brother,
Armand

Editorial Note: Needless to tell you, now that you have finished "The Gentleman from Paris," you have just read a brilliant tour de force—a double tour de force. Not only has John Dickson Carr devised a scintillating mystery—the "miracle" problem as distinguished from the "locked room"—but he has also challenged you to identify his detective character. The true identity of Thaddeus Perley is a magnificent "unexpected ending"—at least, we hope it was a thunderclap of surprise.

Those of you who deduced or guessed the identity of Thaddeus Perley know how lavishly Mr. Carr spread his clues throughout the story. But those of you who did not realize that Mr. Carr had a double trick up his sleeve may enjoy a recapitulation of the signs and symbols which identified Thaddeus Perley as the Father of the Detective Story, Edgar A. Poe himself.

First, there was the temporal clue: the story takes place in April 1849, exactly eight years after Poe wrote "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the world's first detective story, and a mere six months before he died.

Next, the portrait clue: Thaddeus Perley was described as a slight man of dark complexion, wearing a shabby coat of military cut; he had a dark moustache, wild and wandering eyes, and was in his cups—"not very steady on his feet." Surely this is a 'tec tintype of Edgar Allan Poe.

Next, the literary clue: Perley's reference to "what song the Sirens sang, and what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond *all* conjecture." This is a quotation from Sir Thomas Browne's *Dedication to Urn-*

Burial, but, infinitely more revealing, it is the epigraph which prefaces Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Next, the criminological clue: Perley's statement that he had given aid to the prefect of the Parisian police was a reference, of course, to Monsieur G—— in "The Purloined Letter."

Next, the psychological clue: Perley's comments on the insoluble mystery brought to him by the Marquis de Lafayette: "Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault. Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain! A little *too* self-evident!" These are the precise words Dupin used to describe the supposedly insoluble mystery in "The Purloined Letter!"

Next, the creative clue: the missing will in "The Gentleman from Paris" is hidden in the very spirit of the missing document in "The Purloined Letter"—the perfect, the identical spirit! Indeed, as so often happens in this ingenious world of ours, the pupil has outdone the master: the hiding place of the will is even cleverer than the hiding place of the letter—no mean accomplishment by Mr. Carr, even with the advantages of more than a century of detective-story development.

And finally, the master clue—the name of the detective character. It is an established fact that Poe often used assumed names, the best known of which are Edgar A. Perry, 'Henri le Rennet, and Edward S. T. Grey. But on page 626, Volume II, of Hervey Allen's *ISRAFEL: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Doran, 1927), you will find a quotation from *Reminiscences of Gabriel Harrison* (*The New York Times*, March 1899). In 1844—five years before the events in Mr. Carr's story—Gabriel Harrison ran a tobacco and wine shop in lower Manhattan; he was also president of the White Eagle Political Club. Poe once visited Harrison's store, asked for some tobacco, discovered that he had no money to pay for it, and was given the tobacco free by Harrison. Poe was so grateful for this kindness that he wrote a campaign song for the political club and presented it to Harrison, who recalled the incident as follows:

"I was delighted and wanted to pay him something for his trouble, but the only thing he would accept was a bag of my best coffee. As he was going I said I should like to know his name.

"'Certainly,' he answered, with a faint smile. 'Thaddeus Perley, at your service.'"

Ellery Queen

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The celebration of *EQMM*'s 50th anniversary has sent me back to the issues of the Forties, specifically to 1949 when Anthony Boucher made his debut as resident critic. Widely regarded as the very best reviewer in the genre's history, he lived in a time where it really was possible for one critic (provided he was as fast and acute a reader as Boucher) to stay on top of the whole crime-mystery-suspense field. With the February 1949 issue, he took over the news and review column "Speaking of Crime," succeeding Howard Haycraft, who had left to become a Mystery Guild editorial advisor. After four bimonthly columns, he began the "Best Mysteries of the Month" feature from February to May 1950, resuming it in November 1957 and continuing it until his death in 1968.

Here are a pair of quotes from the April 1949 column, one of which could have been written today and one not: 1) "There have been few mystery novels in the past year, particularly of the pursuit-suspense type, which would not have been twice as effective at half the length." 2) "Crime Club at last raised its price to \$2.25, leaving Simon & Schuster and McKay as (I believe) the only regular publishers of whodunits clinging to the traditional two dollars."

Among the authors championed by Boucher in his early columns

were the currently fashionable Jim Thompson, whose *Nothing More Than Murder* is a "good, hard, sexy, Cain-ish study in human evil" (August 1949); John (later Ross) Macdonald, whose *The Moving Target* "has brought a fresh warmth and humanity to the hard-boiled novel just when it stood most in danger of becoming a routine hack form" (August 1949); Robert M. Coates, whose *Wisteria Cottage* is flatly called "one of the milestones in the history of murder fiction" (February 1949); and Ursula Curtiss, whose debut *Voice Out of Darkness* "demonstrates that all the disquieting virtues of the Had-I-But-Knowners can be attained with crispness and restraint" (February 1949).

Boucher always believed an anthology should be judged both on the quality and unfamiliarity of its stories and on the quality of the accompanying editorial apparatus. On those bases, he certainly would have enjoyed *Murder Impossible* (Carroll & Graf, \$18.95), edited by Jack Adrian and Robert Adey. This is at least the fifth anthology to be devoted to locked rooms and impossible crimes (including 1987's *Death Locked In*, which Adey co-edited with Douglas G. Greene), but it shows there is no shortage of relatively unfamiliar stories worthy of collection, including a Jacques Futrelle story that is *not* "The Problem of Cell 13" and con-

tributions from writers as varied as John Dickson Carr (a story and a radio play), Edward D. Hoch, Bill Pronzini, and Barry Perowne. The final entry, Alex Atkinson's "Chapter the Last: Merriman Explains," is, as advertised, the sharpest and funniest of Carr parodies, as well as one that will be unfamiliar to most readers. And the individual story introductions are among the best extant, reminding me of nothing so much as the great and often lengthy *EQMM* story notes of the Forties.

One of the more unexpected contributors to the Adrian-Adey anthology is John Lutz, recently and deservedly elected president of the Mystery Writers of America. He seems to grow more and more prolific, and two recent private-eye novels, published only a month apart, illustrate both his versatility and his quality control.

*** John Lutz: *Bloodfire*, Holt, \$17.95. Florida private eye Fred Carver, a disabled ex-cop, stars in a grim, downbeat series of which this is the fifth entry. First asked by a supposed pharmaceutical salesman to find his missing wife, Carver winds up helping the wife

flee when he discovers the husband's true identity. The prose and characterization are outstanding, and Lutz delivers a series of well managed surprises at the end.

*** John Lutz: *Diamond Eyes*, St. Martin's, \$15.95. The longer-established St. Louis eye Alo Nudger is also a former cop, though in his case he left because of a nervous stomach. Though his cases are not comic mysteries in the Donald Westlake-Phoebe Atwood Taylor sense, they are somewhat lighter than the Carvers, while just as effectively written. This time Nudger witnesses an on-the-ground aircraft explosion while meeting a friend's flight and becomes involved in a complicated scam regarding some stolen diamonds.

*** Nancy Pickard: *I.O.U.*, Pocket Books, \$17.95. Following the death of her mother, long hospitalized with mental problems, Jenny Cain leaves her job as a foundation director to explore her own background, including the failure of the family clam business. The Cain series is one of the best going, well plotted, rich in humor and probing characterization, taking on new challenges with every entry.

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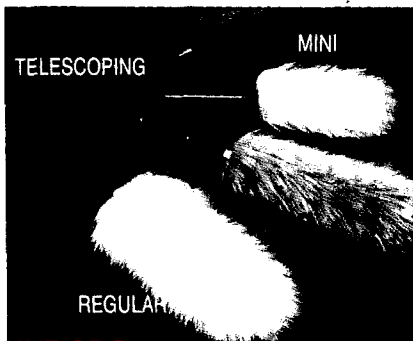
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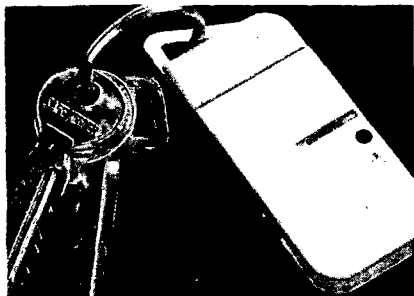
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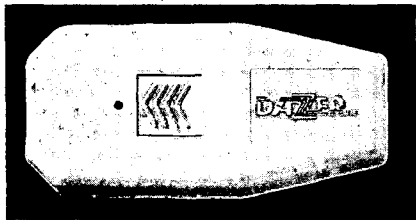


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a **NEW** combination story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"This person who tried to kill you," Michael asked Gunter Helmure, "was it a Gypsy?"

"I don't know. It was too dark to tell."

They proceeded to a modest apartment building on Alser Strasse. The art deco touches in the lobby dated it to the 1930s, but the building had been kept up reasonably well. The apartment itself was well furnished, with a bookcase that filled one wall and embroidered curtains on the windows. Standing at one window, Michael happened to notice a man who seemed to be watching the building from a doorway across the street . . .

THE SPY AND THE GYPSY

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

Helmure was a literate man, and when he reached the bank of the Danube Canal and saw the outline of the great Ferris wheel at the Prater Amusement Park he remembered at once Graham Greene's description of the scene in *The Third Man*. The wheel was almost a hundred years old and it had changed little since Greene described it in 1949.

Helmure was in Vienna that August for a symposium on Gypsy culture and language, an attempt by various linguists and writers to build a common language that could unify the dozen or more dialect groups of the present Romany language. He also had another task, one not directly connected to the symposium. He had to deliver a small package to someone who would contact him at the amusement park. It was a simple task, really, but it would earn him a commission of ninety-five thousand dollars.

He crossed the canal bridge and strolled past the Ferris wheel,

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waiting for the contact he expected at any moment. The evening was a bit cool for late August and he had been tempted to zip up the brown jacket he was wearing. But now the lights of the Volksprater fun fair added a certain warmth. He paused momentarily at a refreshment stand to buy a lingos, one of the oversized snacks of fried dough sprinkled with garlic that the Viennese had somehow imported from Hungary.

Holding it with a paper napkin, he continued strolling down a dim path between two low buildings that housed some of the park offices. Halfway down, he spotted a man on the ground and another bent over him, quickly going through his pockets. He dropped the lingos and hurried forward, calling, "Stop, there! What are you doing?"

The mugger, if that's what he was, took off on the run, vanishing around the corner of the building. Helmure bent over the fallen man, trying to help him up. Then he saw blood on his jacket and realized the man was dead.

The police officer who questioned him and wrote down his statement remarked that he was wearing a zippered jacket identical to that of the murder victim. "In fact," the officer commented, "he looks a bit like you."

And so Helmure realized he had been the intended victim.

The floor of offices overlooking the Thames which had been Rand's home for all the years he directed the course of the Department of Concealed Communications had never seemed so foreign to him as it did in the summer following Hastings' forced retirement. Parkinson was in charge of the departments now, overseeing not only Double-C but several others as well. Rand had always thought of him as "young" Parkinson, but now he was in his mid-forties and looking every day of it.

The cutback in the number of department heads had come about with the end of the Cold War. Parkinson found himself with a higher rank in British Intelligence than he'd ever thought possible, but he also discovered that in these days of Eastern European turmoil the job paid little more than that of a department head a decade earlier.

This day in late August was the first time he had invited Rand to his office, the first time he'd asked him to undertake an assignment since Hastings retired. "I know we don't have the sort of relationship you had with Hastings," he said, reaching for a cigarette

and then changing his mind. "Perhaps we never will. But this is the sort of simple little thing you often did for him."

"Simple little thing," Rand repeated ironically. "A man shot dead at the Volksprater fun fair and it's a simple little thing."

"At least let me tell you about Gunter Helmure—"

"I know all about Gunter Helmure. His mother was a Gypsy and his father was German. He's been very active in the movement toward some sort of Gypsy unity through language reform. I knew him quite well in the early Seventies, though I haven't seen him in almost twenty years."

"You can identify him, that's the important thing. And he would trust you. We believe the man killed at the fun fair was mistaken for Helmure. We had him under surveillance when he stopped at one of the refreshment stands in the park. A similarly dressed man came along at that moment and proceeded along the path Helmure was following. In a darkened area between two buildings, he was shot with a silenced weapon. Helmure caught sight of the killer going through his victim's pockets and frightened him off."

"Why were you having Helmure watched?" Rand asked.

"He may be in possession of a small package of improved 860 microcomputer chips. These chips, developed by the Intel Corporation, are capable of performing more than one hundred million math operations a second. Several of the chips can be linked together to build the supercomputers needed to design advanced weapons systems quickly."

Rand shook his head. "You're getting a bit theoretical for me, Parkinson."

"There's nothing theoretical about it. A machine exists in this country right now that links together more than six hundred chips. It's at Edinburgh University. It can process more than four billion math operations a second."

"How much are these chips that Helmure is carrying worth?"

"We believe an unidentified Middle Eastern nation is willing to pay close to a million dollars for them. For arranging the deal and acting as courier, Helmure will be paid ten percent."

"A tidy sum," Rand admitted.

"We want you to contact him, convince him he can trust our people."

"That would be a good trick. From what I've seen, I don't know if I'd trust our people."

"We're relying on you, Rand. After what happened at the fun fair, a stranger could never get close to him."

"What is our goal in this?"

Parkinson decided to have the cigarette now. Perhaps it gave him time to properly phrase his answer. "We want to prevent delivery of the computer chips to their buyer. We believe it to be an Arab named Dashi Kavir, a dangerous man under any circumstances."

Rand thought about it. "Was it our people who tried to kill him at the fun fair?"

"Certainly not!"

As Rand left the office, he wondered if that was true.

At about the same time, a train carrying Michael Vlado was pulling into the Vienna station. Michael was no stranger to the city, though it was several years since he'd last visited here. He sometimes felt that his life was consumed with travel these days, as he sought to find a safe and receptive haven for his Gypsy tribe. The villages of the Romanian hills had been home for as long as he could remember, but now everything was changing. The country's Communist government, brutal as it was, had solved the Gypsy problem by denying its existence. The new, unstable government was trying to drive the Gypsies out, aided by some neo-fascist groups.

Now, in Vienna, a conference on Gypsy culture and language was under way. The city had been chosen, no doubt, because hundreds of Gypsy families were crowding the refugee centers, having fled their farms in Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The turmoil in Eastern Europe had brought with it a surge of anti-Gypsy feeling which the new governments were only too eager to satisfy. Michael hoped that someone in Vienna might have a solution, if not for the entire problem, then at least for the people of his village.

He knew he had at least one friend in Vienna, a man named Gunter Helmure. He was only half Gypsy, but he combined their shrewdness and occasional lawlessness with the intelligence of his German father. He was speaking at one of the conference sessions and Michael arranged to sit in on it.

Listening in the audience, he realized that the lecture on the Romany language with its roots in Sanskrit or early Hindi meant little to him. If he had ever imagined the Gypsies as having a homeland, it certainly wasn't northwest India. But after the session, he sought out Gunter Helmure. The big Germanic-looking Gypsy was

overjoyed to see him. "An old friend at last! Michael, how have you been? How is your wife?"

"Rosanna is fine, but the people of my village are restless. They feel the time has come to move on. But where do they move?"

Helmure nodded sadly. "They are not alone, Michael. I have spoken with many people these past few days who have similar problems."

"What about you? Where are you living now?"

"Mainly in Paris. I'm here for only two weeks."

"Still married?"

"Divorced, but I have a friend in Vienna."

The news didn't surprise Michael. The last time he'd seen Gunter, the marriage was already on the rocks. "You came to speak at the seminar?"

Helmure hesitated. "Mainly that, and a bit of other business."

Michael patted him on the shoulder. "I know what that means. Vienna has a long history of black-market dealings. After the war it was penicillin, wasn't it?"

"We are both too young to remember that." But the smile faded quickly from Helmure's face. "Michael, someone tried to kill me two nights ago."

"Here in Vienna?"

He nodded. "At the Volksprater fun fair. You know the place?"

"I know it."

"Where are you staying while you're here?"

"Nowhere yet. My train got in shortly before your session."

"I'm staying at a friend's apartment while he's away. There's an extra bedroom if you want to share it with me for a few days."

"I'd appreciate that," Michael said. "I hope someone at the conference will help me find a place for my people."

"It's that bad in Romania, is it?"

"Getting worse by the day."

"It's not much better here. The refugee camps are crowded with Gypsy families."

"This person who tried to kill you—was it a Gypsy?"

"I don't know. It was too dark to tell."

They proceeded to a modest apartment building on Alser Strasse. The art deco touches in the lobby dated it to the 1930s, but the building had been kept up reasonably well. The apartment itself was well furnished, with a bookcase that filled one wall and embroidered curtains on the windows. Standing at one window, Michael

happened to notice a man who seemed to be watching the building from a doorway across the street.

Rand had arrived at the session in Vienna too late to see Gunter Helmure, but the conference secretary furnished him with the address where he was staying. Rand reached the apartment building in time to see Helmure entering with another man, a darkly handsome Gypsy in his mid-forties. Not wanting to speak with his old friend in a stranger's presence, he waited in a doorway across the street. Presently, in the late afternoon, Helmure left the building alone and walked down the block to a small grocery store. Rand crossed the street, trailing behind.

Helmure gave a start when he glanced up from the display of fresh vegetables and saw him. His hand moved toward his waist but then relaxed. "It's Jeffrey Rand! *Isn't* it? After all these years!"

"Hello, Gunter. How've you been?"

"Reasonably well. What are you doing in Vienna?"

"Looking for you, as a matter of fact. Is there someplace we can talk?"

"I don't— Are you still with the government?"

"Retired nearly fifteen years. I just run errands for people now."

"You're looking fine. Retirement must agree with you. What did you want to talk about?"

Rand glanced around at the women picking over heads of cabbage. "Not here," he said. "How about that little park across the street?"

The park was in the shape of a small square, with graveled walks and a few benches. In the center was a life-sized statue of a lute-playing woman, part of the city's musical heritage.

"Now what is all this?" Helmure asked Rand as they walked.

"Some friends in London wanted me to approach you. They learned you were almost killed a couple of nights ago."

"Word travels fast. Maybe it was your friends who wanted to do me in."

"Whatever you're involved in, there's great concern about it. They heard you're trying to make a delivery."

"Trying to make an honest dollar, or franc, or pound—that's all."

"Close to a million honest dollars, from what they heard. And not all that honest, either, Gunter."

Helmure put an arm around Rand's shoulders. "You weren't all this stuffy twenty years ago. What have you been doing with yourself? Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Someone in your line of business?"

"No, as a matter of fact. She teaches archaeology. How about you?"

"A wife in the past. There's a girl here in Vienna who's young enough to be my daughter. Those are the best kind."

"Gypsy?"

"No. My German blood shows through occasionally. Her name is Theresa Bauer. She's with the United Nations."

They came to a stone bench and sat down together. Then Rand said quietly, "Tell me about the computer chips."

When the apartment bell rang, Michael's first thought was that Helmure had forgotten his key. He had been gone for twenty minutes, enough time to purchase the few things needed for their dinner. He pushed the buzzer to open the lobby door and then waited to greet Helmure when he emerged from the elevator. But it was not Helmure. It was a blonde young woman wearing jeans and a sweat-shirt.

"I'm looking for Gunter," she announced. "Is he here?"

"He went to the store." Michael hesitated about letting her enter. There had been one attempt on Gunter's life already.

"Are you a friend of his?" she asked.

"Yes. Michael Vlado. I'm visiting from Romania."

"I'm Theresa Bauer. Perhaps he mentioned me." She spoke German with a northern accent, unlike most Austrians, and he suspected she was originally from there.

"Come in," he said, unable to keep her waiting in the hall any longer. "Are you Viennese?"

"No, I'm German. I work for the United Nations here."

Michael had seen the complex of buildings on his way into the city. It had been built in 1973 for some 4,500 members of the U.N. staff stationed in Vienna. "Gunter should be back any minute. Have you known him long?"

"I met him last year when he presented a petition to the U.N. on behalf of Gypsy refugees from Eastern Europe. We renewed our friendship when he came here for the conference." She was a pretty woman with a ready smile and friendly eyes. Michael could understand his friend's attraction to her.

As if on cue, the apartment door opened and Gunter entered, carrying a string bag containing a few vegetables. "Well, Theresa! I see you two have met."

"She was just telling me she works for the U.N.," Michael said. "That must be an interesting job these days."

"They could be of more help to Gypsies." Helmure set down the vegetables and looked around for a cigarette. "Because we have no boundaries and no flag, we do not exist."

"That's not true," Theresa countered. "We've done a great deal to help refugees of all sorts, including Gypsies." It was obviously a topic they'd discussed before and her tone was good-natured.

She helped Gunter prepare a light supper and the evening passed quickly. Michael was beginning to wonder if she planned to spend the night when shortly after nine o'clock she glanced at her watch and announced she must be going. Gunter accompanied her to her car.

"She's a charming young woman," Michael told him when he returned. "You're very lucky."

"She's just someone I know here. It's nothing serious."

"Do you have a girl in every city?"

Helmure smiled but declined to answer. Instead he asked Michael about his village, and about Gypsy conditions in Romania since the overthrow of the government the previous December. "This movement toward a common language will be a great help to us all," he said. "It will bring with it a new Gypsy spirit, a new sense of identity."

"For our children, perhaps," Michael agreed. "But what about now? What can I take back with me to my village?"

Gunter sighed. "I promise I will do what I can, Michael. Now could I ask you for something in return?"

"You have given me nothing, old friend."

"I have given you hope, and a promise."

Michael nodded. "What do you need? Does it have to do with the attempt on your life?"

"It does. The attempt came while I was trying to make a certain delivery at the Prater. Sometime after ten tonight, I expect a phone call which may send me there again. You could help keep me alive."

"Are you mixed up with drugs, Gunter?"

"No. It has nothing to do with drugs, I swear."

"What, then?"

"It might be better if you don't know."

"If you want my help—"

"All right." Gunter went to the bookcase and took down a thick

copy of *Buddenbrooks* in the original German, part of a matched set. Opening the cover, he extracted a carefully wrapped package.

"A hollowed-out book!" Michael examined it, for the moment more interested in the container than the contents. "I've read about them but I've never seen one."

"It's still an effective hiding place." Gunter unwrapped the parcel and revealed hundreds of tiny plastic envelopes such as might be used for a stamp collection. Each one contained a square piece of mica even smaller than a stamp, imprinted with a complex pattern of lines so tiny Michael could barely make them out.

"What are they?" he asked.

"Computer chips. Microprocessor chips, to be exact. You're looking at close to a million dollars' worth of them."

Michael shook his head. The world of supercomputers was beyond his immediate knowledge. He knew such things existed, but that was all. "Where did you get them? What are you doing with them?"

"They came to me from a man in California. I'm delivering them to a representative of a Middle Eastern nation very much in the news these days. I will collect payment in cash and keep ten percent of it for myself."

"Who tried to kill you?"

"I can only assume it was Dashi, the man I was meeting. Perhaps he wanted the package without the necessity of paying for it."

"Why are you being trusted with the chips, and with the cash they'll bring?"

"This is how I make my living now. I'm a highly paid messenger. If I don't deliver, I'll be out of business. I might even be dead."

"All right," Michael said. "What do you want of me?"

"There's another complication. British intelligence has a man on my tail—a friend I knew long ago. He wants to prevent me from making the delivery. He may be watching the apartment right now."

"I glimpsed someone earlier," Michael told him. He described the man.

"That was Rand. I can't cover my rear while I worry about what might be waiting ahead. You see why I need you?"

"Spell it out a bit more clearly, Gunter."

"I want you to carry these computer chips for me. I will go ahead with a fake package. If Rand waylays me, or if my Middle Eastern contact tries to kill me again, they will get nothing."

"How will that protect your life?"

"The killer of that innocent man at the fun fair won't risk another

mistake. This time he'll want to be sure that I'm carrying the package. And I want to be sure I get the money. If I give him a fake package, he won't kill me until he has the real one. That's when I whistle for you to come forward. I'll have the money and there will be two of us to his one. He won't try anything then. I'll make the delivery and we'll be gone. If Rand wants to deal with the buyer, that's his business."

Michael was no longer a young man, though he felt he could still handle himself well in a knife fight. The man seeking Gunter's package, however, might resort to weapons other than knives. He was weighing his options when the telephone rang.

"Yes," Helmure said brusquely into the mouthpiece. "I'll be there, near the Ferris wheel. But no business like last time or you'll never see the package." He hung up and turned to Michael. "That was Dashi. It's time to be going."

Rand had gained little information from his conversation with Gunter Helmure. The Gypsy admitted that he was delivering a package of microprocessor chips, but refused to identify the buyer. He claimed to have no idea what country the chips were destined for. After they parted, Rand visited his contact at the British embassy. As in many other countries, the station chief in Vienna served as the embassy information officer. His name was Leonard Cranston and he was a product of the British public schools, complete with a shiny desk and a framed photograph of his proper English wife posed against a bookcase of leatherbound German classics. He even smoked a proper pipe.

"Rand, isn't it? I was told to expect you." He was in his late thirties, with a thin military moustache and combed-back hair. He slipped the file folder he'd been studying into a desk drawer, but Rand knew he'd have done the same thing in the presence of a stranger.

"I seem to have run into problems," Rand admitted.

"With that half-Gypsy—Gunter Helmure?"

"Yes."

"Is he carrying the microprocessor chips?"

"Yes, but he won't tell me who the buyer is. It may be this chap Dashi Kavir, as Parkinson suspects, but that doesn't tell us who Kavir is dealing with."

"Can you arrange to see Gunter Helmure again before their next meeting?"

"I suppose so."

"You'd better have this," Cranston said, resting his pipe in the ashtray and reaching into a desk drawer. He took out what looked like a silver-plated cigarette case and slid it across the desk toward Rand. "It fires a .22 bullet from that little tube."

Rand didn't touch it. "I don't go in for gadgets. Never did."

"I can get you a standard Beretta—"

"No."

Cranston shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Gunter placed the carefully wrapped package in Michael's hand. "This is worth a great deal of money. I'm trusting you with it, Michael. Don't let me down or we'll both be dead."

"I'll be careful."

"Keep me in sight every second, but don't come forward until I signal."

"It's to be the Prater again?"

Gunter nodded. "Dashi likes bright lights."

Michael had seen the Ferris wheel from the train approaching the city, but close up that evening its great black circle seemed to merge with the tracks and girders of the adjacent roller coaster, creating a monster that turned slowly against the sky. It was very, very different from the miniature rides he'd recently encountered at a Gypsy fun fair in the north of Italy.

He watched Gunter approach the wheel and stand waiting beneath the bright lights. A misty rain was starting to fall, driving some in the crowd to shelter, but Gunter, wearing a raincoat, didn't move. Presently he was joined by another man, wearing a dark trenchcoat and a hat pulled down to hide his face. But Michael's attention was distracted by a third man, who seemed to be moving toward him through the crowd. He turned quickly, circling the red neon of a giant rotor, putting it between himself and the man. Something was wrong here. He'd been spotted too quickly.

Michael felt the weight of the small package he carried in his inside pocket, took it out, and ripped open the paper at one end. It was full of wood chips, not the carefully engineered microprocessor chips Gunter had shown him earlier. Gunter had substituted packages—he carried the real one and Michael carried nothing but the seed of his own destruction! The man who stalked him would kill him for the wrong package! He muttered a Gypsy curse and turned to run.

For a moment he thought he'd lost the man, but then he was back,

heading off Michael's escape route. Michael ran down the wet pavement between the food concessions, found himself at a dead end, and turned. His assailant was behind him, drawing a silenced target pistol from inside his raincoat. "The package," he said quietly in broken English that Michael could barely understand. "I want Hel-mure's package."

"In here," Michael said, reaching for the dagger on his belt. Surrendering the package wouldn't prolong his life. The man with the gun had cold eyes. He was no stranger to killing.

Even before Michael's hand was free of his jacket, the man fired, and the soft pop of the weapon coincided with a tug on Michael's sleeve as the bullet scored a near miss. Michael hurled the knife and dropped to the pavement. He heard the man grunt and saw him fall. After a moment he crawled over to retrieve his knife.

The rain that had been threatening all evening became a light drizzle shortly after Rand reached the Prater. He'd followed Gunter from the apartment where his old friend was staying. The other Gypsy was with him, wearing a red Russian-style tunic beneath a dark-blue suit whose baggy shape was showing signs of wear. The style of the suit told Rand the man had probably come from Eastern Europe, perhaps with the Gypsy refugees who were arriving daily.

As they neared the fun fair, the second man fell behind, allowing Gunter to enter the area alone. Rand tried to keep them both in sight, but it was impossible. Before he knew it, Gunter had been swallowed up by the crowd and the red-shirted Gypsy veered off to the left as if in flight.

Rand ran after him, and then saw that another man was closing in on him, too. They passed a line of food concessions and a garishly lit display proclaiming SEX MUSEUM in English. A girl eating a large piece of fried dough loomed in front of Rand and he shoved her aside as gently as possible, passing close enough to smell the garlic from the dough. The two men were lost from view.

Rand reached a corner between two exhibits and half tumbled over a body on the wet pavement. His knee hit the asphalt before he caught himself and he knew that he'd skinned it. Looking up from his position half atop the body, he saw the red-shirted Gypsy, blood-stained knife in one of his hands. He groped for some weapon to defend himself and his fingers closed around a pistol by the fallen man's fingers. It was a long, awkward weapon fitted with a silencer. He raised it quickly and pointed it at the red shirt.

"Wait!" the Gypsy urged, holding a hand in front of him.

Perhaps it was hearing the word in English that made Rand hesitate. "Who are you?" he demanded, keeping the pistol pointed at the man's chest.

"Michael Vlado. A friend of Gunter's, like yourself."

"What do you know about me?"

"I—"

They heard a scream cutting across the noise of the fun fair, from the direction of the Ferris wheel. "Come on!" Rand shouted. "Something's gone wrong!"

"I had to kill a man here," Vlado pointed out. "Isn't that enough for you?" But he followed quickly after Rand.

By the time they reached the Ferris wheel, a large crowd had gathered. A woman was sobbing, and another muttered, "The poor man." Rand fought his way through until he could see the body on the wet pavement. It was Gunter Helmure and he was dead.

Michael led Rand back through Vienna's night streets to the apartment Gunter had borrowed from a friend. Now the place seemed lonely and empty, filled with the gloom that Gunter's death brought with it. "He was shot," Michael said, turning on some lights. "I could see the wound in the back of his head."

"A gun with a silencer. The man that came after you had one." Rand looked searchingly around the small room. He frowned and walked to the bookcases to study the matched sets of German literature. "This is familiar," he remarked.

"Look here." Michael took down the volume of *Buddenbrooks* and showed Rand the hollowed-out center. "He kept the package of computer chips in here." On the way to the apartment, he had already explained how he'd recognized Rand from Gunter's description of him, and from seeing him from the apartment window. He'd told him about the man who had stalked him with the silenced pistol and how he'd stabbed him in self-defense. "I don't like to kill people," he told Rand. "I didn't even know his name."

"It was Dashi Kavir," Rand said. "I saw a picture of him earlier today. He was after the microcomputer chips he thought you were carrying. He's the one who tried to kill Gunter the other night."

"I didn't have them. My package was a fake."

"I guessed as much. Gunter was not the sort to trust anyone with something that valuable, not even a friend. You were merely a pawn, and Kavir went after you."

Michael didn't want to believe it, but he knew it was true. "Could he have shot Gunter, too?"

"I don't see how. He was dead before we heard that scream."

"And the computer chips?"

"Gunter must have been carrying the real package himself and the killer took it," Rand speculated.

"Probably," Michael agreed, but there was uncertainty in his response. Before he could say more, the doorbell rang. He took out his knife and held it out of sight as he went to the door.

"Who's there?"

"Theresa. Let me in."

He opened the door slowly and slipped the knife under his shirt when he saw she was alone. "Gunter is dead," he told her bluntly.

"I know. A friend at the U.N. called me with the news just now. It was reported to him because Gunter was a speaker at the Gypsy conference. I hurried over as soon as I heard."

"This is Mr. Rand, a British friend of Gunter's who happened to be in town."

She turned toward Rand with the briefest of smiles, then back to Michael. "What happened? Do you know?"

"He went to meet someone at the Prater amusement park and was shot in the back of the head."

"Were you with him?"

"I was there, but someone attacked me at the same time. I'm lucky to be alive."

"An Arab named Dashi Kavir was behind it," Rand told her.

"Where is he now?"

"I killed him," Michael admitted. "In self-defense."

"Did he kill Gunter?"

"No. It may have been one of his men."

She nodded, as if accepting that explanation. "Gunter had something he told me was worth a great deal of money—something he had to deliver."

"We know about that," Michael said. "It was why he was killed."

He prepared them all a drink, and Theresa stayed a while longer, talking about Gunter, trying to make sense of his death. "He wanted Gypsies to have a single language," she said. "He thought it would help unify them."

"I came here seeking help from him," Michael admitted. "I rule a Gypsy tribe in the hills of Romania and we seek a new home. But Gunter couldn't help me. He had other things on his mind."

"He was a troubled soul," she agreed. "I hope he's at rest now."

After she departed, Michael watched her from the window. "She might have killed him herself," he speculated.

Rand considered his drink. "It would have been safer for her to have killed him here, at the apartment. No, I don't think the answer is as simple as that."

"Who did it, then?" Michael wondered.

Rand raised his eyes and looked at him. "I suppose in a way I did."

In the morning, on his way to the airport, Rand stopped at the British embassy to see Leonard Cranston one last time. The man with the thin moustache was smiling as he invited Rand into his office. "Going back to London, eh?"

"That's right. My work here is over. Gunter Helmure is dead."

"Yes, I heard about that."

"I suppose whoever killed him got the microcomputer chips."

Cranston lit his pipe. "No, as a matter of fact the package was still on his body. The police recovered it. It's in safe hands now."

"Odd that the killer didn't take it."

"Well, there was the crowd—"

"After the rain started, it thinned out quite a bit."

Cranston frowned at Rand. "What are you getting at?"

"Did you kill him yourself, or do you have someone else do the dirty work?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You knew Gunter Helmure. That was your apartment he was staying at. In that picture on your desk your wife is posed in front of the bookcase. Gunter's Gypsy friend, Michael Vlado, showed me the hollowed-out copy of *Buddenbrooks* Gunter used for a hiding place. But it wasn't his apartment, wasn't his library. He'd hardly carve the center out of a friend's fancy book. And he didn't bring the book with him because it was part of a set. No, the apartment belonged to someone who occasionally had something to hide, someone who was friendly enough with Gunter to show him the hollowed-out book. Perhaps in return you thought he'd share the secret of his mission to Vienna. When he didn't, Parkinson back in London got me to come here because I'd once been Gunter's friend. You needed only one bit of information—was Gunter delivering microcomputer chips for sale to a foreign government? Once I'd confirmed that, his fate was sealed."

"I thought you understood," Cranston said, abandoning any pretense. "I offered you a gun if you wanted to do it yourself."

"My God, Cranston, why did he have to be killed at all? You could have broken into the apartment anytime and taken those micro-chips!"

"He'd have been back in another month or two with another shipment. Men like Helmure never quit, not until they're dead. It was the same with that scientist who developed the long-range artillery for Iraq. He didn't stop until someone put a bullet in him."

There was nothing more for Rand to say. The Cold War was over, but men like Leonard Cranston would never change. Rand had spent most of his life with them and knew they'd never change.

He left the British embassy knowing he would never work for Parkinson or Double-C again. Those days were gone forever. Perhaps there would be other things for him here in the new Europe. Perhaps there might even be a way of helping Michael Vlado and his people.



DETECTIVERSE

SPOUSE GROUSE

by JOAN MANDARINO

The mystery writer's forced by fate
To dwell on murder and on hate
So that his plots can germinate.

I've wondered frequently of late:
Does all that mayhem generate
Some qualms within the writer's mate?

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CLARK HOWARD AGAIN!

The man is phenomenal! For the fourth year since the EQMM Readers Award was initiated in 1985, a story by Clark Howard has been voted the favorite of the year by our readers. "Animals" placed first in 1985 (with his "McCulla's Kid" placing third), "Scalplock" placed first in 1986 (with "The Last One To Cry" placing fourth), and in 1988 "The Dakar Run" placed first and "The Color of Death" third.

In 1990, his stirring "Deeds of Valor" in the November issue ranked first of all the original stories published in EQMM—and his "Challenge the Widow-Maker" in the August issue ranked second—in addition to being nominated for best short story of the year by the Mystery Writers of America!

This is a remarkable history even without taking into account the fact that Clark Howard has spent these same years researching and writing books of size and power. We congratulate him for his great continuing popularity with readers. And we congratulate, too, the writer whose story received the next highest vote: Peter Massarelli, for "Once Upon a Time" in the December issue—the first time a Department of Firsts story has ranked among the top third. We hope this vote of confidence inspires Mr. Massarelli to produce more memorable short—and long—fiction in the genre.

An interesting twist in this year's vote: a reprint, Georges Simenon's "A Matter of Life and Death," in the Mid-December issue—the last story in the last issue of the year, in fact—received several votes more than "Deeds of Valor." Since it was a reprint and the final story of the year and therefore strongest in the memory, we cite it as a special case—and well worthy of note that a story first published in 1952 still holds as much power today. This is a wonderful verification of the importance of reprinting classic stories, proof that they are always timely—and that Georges Simenon was indeed one of the greatest writers the mystery genre has produced. Like Clark Howard, expert in both the short form and the long!



CLARK HOWARD

GEORGES
SIMENON

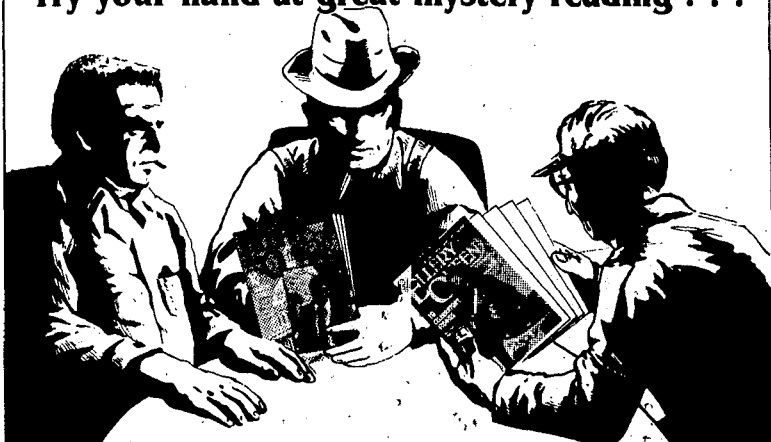


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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a **NEW Baytown story by**

WILLIAM BANKIER

Kinney was amazed, and a little disturbed. This wasn't just another country singer. Why had such talent come wandering into Baytown without fanfare?

The man segued from his theme, modulating to a higher key but retaining the driving tempo as he began to sing the familiar lyrics of "The Wabash Cannonball."

Kinney turned to where Beth was sitting beside him in the viewers' room. She was watching his face. "You feel it, too?" she asked . . .

THE PHANTOM OF THE GRAND OLE OPRY

by **WILLIAM BANKIER**

When Beth called through from the switchboard, Ernie Kinney was at his desk worrying about a shortage of sponsors. There were only so many merchants in Baytown willing to buy radio time on CBAY. In the summer, most of them weren't prepared to spend a buck when Kinney couldn't guarantee they would get two bucks back.

"There's a gentleman here to see you." Beth sounded amused, reminding the program director of fun and games after a recent staff party.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. He's wearing a mask."

"A small break, Bethel. It's a hot day."

"He really is. I think you have to see this."

The guy came into the office carrying a guitar case. He closed the

© 1991 by William Bankier.

door and set the case on the floor beside the spare chair. He was tall and skinny, dressed in jeans and a suede jacket with some fringe on it. He sat down.

The mask was realistic, covering the entire face from hairline to beneath the chin. There were holes for the eyes and mouth. From a distance it might pass. But up close, when the lips moved, it was spooky.

"Thanks for seeing me."

"Is this a promotion?"

"I'd like a job. Singing on your station. I'm the Phantom of the Grand Ole Opry."

Kinney's heart began to pound. His mood had just been elevated from dog days to harvest home. "The hell you say."

"I do country-western stuff. I'm pretty good."

"How come I've never heard of you?"

"You've heard of me now."

Kinney punched the intercom. "Beth, come on in here." Then he said to his visitor, "I take it that's not a machine-gun you're carrying." Then, when Bethel Templeton came in and perched on the credenza, crossing her shiny legs, he told her, "We're about to have an audition."

The acoustic guitar was far from new. The varnish was worn away where his forearm rested on it. The visitor strummed a chord, did some tuning, and then he began to sing. Kinney was surprised to hear one of his favorite Simon and Garfunkel songs.

"Homeward bound, I wish I was

Homeward bound,

Home where my thought's escaping,

Home where my music's playing . . ."

At the end, there was silence in the tiny office. Then Kinney said, "What's your opinion, Beth? Should we hire this guy?"

"Like yesterday."

When she went back to her switchboard, Kinney said, "Okay, I've got a half-hour slot on Thursday nights. Eight o'clock."

"I'll be here."

"Come early and we'll talk contract. After I have a chance to discuss your fee with the owner. But I'll have to know your name."

"Why?"

"We know everybody's name."

"Why can't I just be the Phantom?"

"We can't put Phantom on your paycheck."

"Pay me in cash."

Kinney grinned. This was going to be fun, explaining it to the old man. "It's highly irregular. But who says we have to be regular all the time?"

The old man almost vetoed the idea. He thought it was too screw-ball even for CBAY in the summer. Kinney argued that he had to see the individual and hear him sing and what a natural it was for on-air promotion. So the owner sipped his springwater from the Army canteen on his desk and gave Kinney permission to put the promo spots in the schedule.

"Thursday evening at eight," an announcer would say, "something new under the sun. Tune in CBAY for the Phantom of the Grand Ole Opry. Who is he? Where does he come from? What lies hidden behind his mysterious mask? Nobody knows. But this is for certain: the Phantom sings country songs like you've never heard them sung before. Thursday at eight, right here on the Bay."

That first evening, Beth worked late. She went around to the Paragon Cafe at seven and brought back sandwiches and pie. Kinney took beers from his little refrigerator and they ate in his office. At seven-thirty, Bucky buzzed down from the control room and said, "This place is now haunted."

Kinney and Beth went upstairs and spoke to the Phantom, who was setting up in the small studio. Money wasn't going to be a problem—he signed the contract with an X without bothering to read it.

"I meant to ask you," Kinney said. "Do you need help with a hotel or anything?"

The Phantom shook his head. "I've got my own place to stay."

The duty announcer did the introduction cold from a microphone in the other studio:

"And now it's time for the musical experience all Baytown has been waiting for. Sit back and relax and enjoy—the Phantom of the Grand Ole Opry!"

Bucky touched keys on the consolette to switch from one studio to the other, then threw the singer a hand cue. The tall man at the stand-up microphone began plucking a vamp on his guitar. It had a percussive sound to it, like some of Johnny Cash's accompaniments. But there was an alien tone as well, a backwoods feeling that suggested something too tough to die. He began to sing in an abrupt, narrative style.

"Stranger in town,
 Nobody knows his name.
 Slippin' around,
 Trying to hide his pain.
 Don't interfere,
 Keep clear, whatever you do.
 Wake up tomorrow—
 Find the stranger is you."

Kinney was amazed, and a little disturbed. This wasn't just another country singer. Why had such talent come wandering into Baytown without fanfare?

The man segued from his theme, modulating to a higher key but retaining the driving tempo as he began to sing the familiar lyrics of "The Wabash Cannonball."

Kinney turned to where Beth was sitting beside him in the viewers' room. She was watching his face. "You feel it, too?" she asked.

After the program, the visitor didn't hang around. He packed his guitar, and before anybody could say much of anything he had vanished.

The telephone rang for an hour. There was excitement in town.

In the following days, Kinney took one of the Polaroid photos he had shot while the Phantom was singing and used it to illustrate a newspaper ad. The picture was dark and out of focus, but that was appropriate. It ran that weekend on half a page in the *Banner* with copy identifying the tall, masked figure with guitar held chest-high.

On Saturday evening, just before dark, Kinney turned the pages of his newspaper, smiled at the Phantom, then moved on to the TV listings. He hadn't felt this competent since joining CBAY. That was eighteen months ago when he moved here from North Bay to replace Clement Foy, a part-time clarinet player. Foy used to commandeer station microphones for use on his band gigs.

The job was becoming interesting. The Phantom wasn't Kinney's creation, but there was no reason why he shouldn't accept some credit. Other executives might have told a dude in a plastic mask to take a hike.

Beth called from her bedroom, "I'm going to turn off the air-conditioner in here!"

"Yeah, why not?"

"What's on?" She came through the doorway, wearing his red tank-top, which came to her knees.

"Columbo rerun," he said. Then, looking at her: "You could get arrested for cuteness."

The telephone rang.

Natalie Greb was trying to work. She was bored with her project and wished she had never started writing a history of the Baytown police. It was no help that her father was the Chief. It was a definite minus because he kept bringing home boxes of files for her to read. Maybe if she stalled until September when she resumed her job teaching the sixth grade at Queen Alexandra Public School, she could let the project drop.

Somebody was on the front lawn. It was getting dark, but through the study window she clearly saw a tall man ease himself out of sight behind the big maple. She waited. He reappeared, taking long strides across the grass to crouch low behind the mock orange. His face was shiny.

"Daddy!"

"What?"

"There's somebody on the lawn. Some man."

Chief Greb came into the room. Wide grey police suspenders held his blue pants chest high on a bulky torso. One boot squeaked. "Where?"

"Down there—by the shrubs. You can just see him."

Greb grunted as he threw the sash high. He stuck head and shoulders out of the upstairs window. "Hey! You behind the bushes!"

The man stood and faced the house for a few seconds, frozen like a trained dog. Then he turned and trotted to the corner of the street and out of sight.

"He was wearing a mask," Natalie said. There was something other than fear on her pretty face.

Greb took up the telephone and dialed. When somebody said "CBAY," he asked for Ernie Kinney, was told he was at home, and was given the number. He dialed again. The telephone rang.

"This is Chief Greb," he said when Kinney answered. "Get you at a bad time?"

"It's okay, Chief. What's up?"

"That singer of yours. The one you imported from Nashville. I just chased him off my front lawn."

"Are you sure?"

"Unless there are two guys wandering around town with masks on."

"I sure as hell don't understand that."

"You don't have to." Greb was looking at his daughter's profile against the fading light. She was lifting her long pale hair with both hands, staring wistfully into the night. "But you'd better understand this. If your Phantom is going to start bothering the citizens of this town, me in particular, I am going to arrest him."

"I can't believe he'd do that."

"And I'll make him eat that phony mask."

Kinney put down the telephone and thought about the situation. He decided not to mention Greb's call to his new singer. Things were going well—there was no sense in upsetting the applectart.

Just about everybody in the county was listening to the Phantom of the Grand Ole Opry on Thursday nights. The old man agreed to Kinney's suggestion that they give him a half hour on Saturday as well. People began showing up at the station to get a look at him. There were no facilities at CBAY for a studio audience, so the crowd remained in the street outside the two-story building. A high percentage of women dominated the crowd. The ladies were turned on by this tall young man and his powerful air of mystery. They yelled and waved whenever they caught a glimpse of him coming or going. Then they turned to each other and mocked their own enthusiasm.

Chief Greb hated any disruption of traffic. After a couple of nights when the street was impassable, he put officers on duty to keep the people down on Front Street or on Pinnacle Street in the other direction. The Phantom would arrive in Ernie Kinney's car, chauffeured by the program director. Kinney's role was to collect the singer from a prearranged location, never the same. After the show, he would drop him off at that place and the Phantom would do a flit in his own car. Where did he go? Nobody knew. Kinney wasn't bothered—he enjoyed playing a role in the masquerade.

Natalie kept revising the lyrics she was writing. After a couple of weeks, during which she ignored the police-history project almost entirely, she completed the verses in her immaculate handwriting and made a clean copy on two sheets of bond paper.

On a Thursday evening, she telephoned the radio station and spoke to Ernie Kinney. They'd never met, but when she identified herself he responded with respect. She told him what she'd done, laughing at her efforts but expressing a strong desire to put the lyrics in the hands of the Phantom. "No problem," Kinney said. "Drop them off at the desk and I'll see he gets them tonight."

"But I'd like to hand them to him myself."

"He wants to be private. You can understand that, Natalie. If we start letting people come in—"

"My father's cooperating, isn't he? Keeping the crowds away from the station, stopping cars from following you?"

Kinney sighed. "Okay, be here at half past seven and I'll let you go into the studio."

That evening, Kinney warned the singer that the girl was waiting. He justified the intrusion by explaining she was the police chief's daughter. The masked man went into the studio, prepared to accept whatever she had written and then to send her away. He had no intention of letting this episode get in the way of his objective in coming to Baytown. But he wasn't prepared for the disarming innocence, the sweet purity of Natalie Greb.

He stood in the doorway, observing her. She was in semidarkness on a folding chair, watching the operator in the lighted control room as he cued a disc on the giant turntable. The man let it go, turning up one dial and fading another as he performed a smooth segue in a program of uninterrupted music. Her profile—the snub nose, the high forehead, the perfect lips—emerged into pale light from a fall of smooth hair.

"Natalie?"

She turned. He approached out of shadow, the mask shining faintly in light from the control room. "Mr. Kinney said I could wait here. To give you something I wrote."

"He told me, too."

"Do you mind?"

"No."

She remembered what she was holding. The pages were crumpled now. She thrust them at him. "It's a song. Well, the words for one. I wrote it for you."

With nothing to say, he filled time by uncreasing the pages and reading her neat handwriting. The quality of the work surprised him. "This is good," he said. "Have you written a lot of songs?"

"That's the only one."

"I like it. When I get a chance, I'll set it to music."

Overwhelmed, she watched as he switched on the light, walked to the standing microphone, and lowered his guitar case onto the tall stool. When he turned, she saw the mask properly for the first time. It was eerie to see the eyes moving, the lips set in a firm line,

framed behind smooth plastic cheeks and chin and forehead. Then: "Can I ask you something?" she said.

"What?"

"Were you on our front lawn the other day? Watching the house?"

"I don't remember."

"I'm certain it was you. It's all right with me—I don't mind. But my father was annoyed. And he's the police chief."

"I know." He opened the case and lifted out his guitar. He touched strings and the notes took over—the music blew away all other concerns. "I have to get ready."

"I'm going." She stopped in the doorway. "Can I ask you something else?"

"Go ahead."

"Why do you wear the mask?"

"Because I have to," he said—and went back to his music.

A loon broke the surface of Three Mile Lake. It was a relief to stand without the mask on a narrow strip of sand below his parents' cabin and feel cool air on his face. There was no going back to Tennessee. A long time ago, he had started in Baytown—he was determined to go ahead with his plan and finish here.

The girl, however, was an unexpected player in the game. In the week since she had handed him her verses, he had composed a simple tune. The song wasn't bad. He owed her a chance to hear it. But did his responsibility toward Natalie Greb go beyond that? What about the debt to his father, the promise sworn over a cheap grave a thousand miles away?

He climbed the slope back to the cabin and went inside through the window he had jimmied open to gain access. The place smelled of mildew and rotting boards and animal droppings. It had been a lonely place even when the family used to come here twenty years ago. The better homes were on the other side of the lake where the real beach was, and the variety store by the paved road.

The best time to kill Greb would be sooner rather than later. The shotgun was concealed under the spare tire in the trunk of his car. If he delayed much longer, humming the words Natalie had given him, he might never be able to proceed. And then his year in hospital, all the planning, the desire for revenge, none of it would mean a thing.

He would make his move on Thursday night after the show. When Kinney ferried him to his car, he wouldn't drive out here to the

THE PHANTOM OF THE GRAND OLE OPRY 109
cabin—he'd head for Greb's place instead and go into hiding. The man would show himself eventually, and it would be over.

"I can't believe you did that," Greb said to his daughter. It was about as harsh as his criticism of her ever got, and he half regretted it already.

"He said they're good lyries," she huffed. "I thought you'd be proud."

There was something about her manner. She was different. With her mother dead nearly twelve years now, Greb had done a lot of the bringing up alone. He knew his daughter's expressions, her body language, and suddenly he saw in the turn of her shoulder and the lift of her jaw the stubborn reaction of another man's woman.

"We know nothing about this man. Where he comes from. What he's done. What happened to his face, if anything. He may be a con artist."

"He's not that."

"I don't want you getting involved."

"I already am."

"Then back away."

"No, you back away, Father. I want to get to know him better."

So the Chief's hand was forced. Not that he wouldn't have acted anyway. But his daughter's preoccupation with this so-called Phantom left no alternative. He would go to the studio on Thursday night with a couple of the boys. He would read the riot act to Ernie Kinney if necessary.

And then he would find out once and for all who the Phantom of the Grand Ole Opry really was. And what he thought he was up to in Baytown.

Kinney put up token resistance. He told the police chief, who was in uniform along with two large constables, that he had given the Phantom his word. Nobody would be allowed close to him while he was on CBAY premises.

"What about that stuff you get from Montreal? You and your girl friend out front smoke it at her place on the weekends." Greb smiled.

"I asked around."

"You wouldn't bust me for a little grass?"

"The law is the law."

So the program director allowed the policemen to wait in his office. They listened to the broadcast on a speaker in there. When the

closing theme came on, they hurried upstairs and stood in the dark hallway outside the studio. After the station break, they opened the double doors and went inside.

"Hey, what's up?" The singer was putting his guitar in the case. Instinct told him that he was in trouble.

"Take hold of him," Greb said.

Moving quickly, the constables slipped behind the tall young man and seized his arms at the elbow, pinning them roughly behind his back. Apart from being able to kick out, which he decided not to do, he was helpless.

"I haven't done anything."

"Son," the Chief said calmly, "Baytown has its secrets. But I know what they are. Now you come to town and your identity is this big secret."

"Keep your hands off me."

"I don't intend to touch you. Only the mask."

The Phantom twisted his head one way, then the other. The Chief used the fingertips of both hands to take hold of the mask at either side below the ears. It was fastened with some sort of contact cement. It peeled away easily.

Ernie Kinney arrived in the doorway in time to hear Greb murmur, "Oh, sweet Jesus."

The singer's face was a scramble of scar tissue. Only the eyes and mouth were normal. The rest was a glacial flow of roasted flesh—pink, white, shiny, stretched and twisted like the surface of an airless planet. He said, "Take a good look."

"Let him go," Greb said quietly. He handed the mask to the singer, who did not put it on.

"Satisfied?" he said. "Everybody happy?"

"Why did you come here?"

"I've got a right. I was born here."

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Gary Lomax."

It meant nothing to the newcomer, Kinney. But the locals glanced at each other. "Hell, yes," Greb said. "Lothar Lomax's boy. How is old Lothar?"

"You never heard?"

Kinney moved into the room. "Can I know what's going on?"

The young man fitted the mask back on. He turned to Kinney. "I lived here until I was nineteen. My family moved away twelve years ago. We had to."

Greb's hands were in his tightly stretched back pockets. "I want to talk to this kid," he said. "Everybody else out."

The larger constable hesitated. "Will you be all right?"

"Nothing's going to happen. Go downstairs."

When they were alone in the studio, Greb closed both doors. Then he said, "What happened to your father?"

"He killed himself."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because you destroyed him."

"Are you talking about the illegal gambling house on the South Shore? Your old man was taking a payoff. The politicians decided to have a witch hunt. Sergeant Lothar Lomax got busted and he left town. That's not a reason for suicide."

"Is the house still operating?"

"I believe it is."

"You know it is. You were one of the owners of the place, behind the scenes. Your name never appeared. My dad served you loyally. You could have gone to bat for him but you let him be sacrificed."

Greb sat down. He appeared to study his knuckles but he kept glancing at the masked man on the other side of the room. "Your father was a good cop. But he was his own worst enemy. He drank too much. Am I right? I bet he was smashed when he killed himself."

Gary said nothing.

"The men in this town want a place where they can go and gamble. It's normal. We provide that place. And, yes, I own a share in it. Where's the crime? The lilywhites decide every now and then to make an example. They have their own agenda. Why should I let it destroy me? You're right, we needed a scapegoat and your father was it. And it was proper for him to leave town." Greb paused. "Did he tell you I gave him a rave recommendation in writing?"

"No, he never told me."

The Chief shrugged. "He could have had a life. Where did you end up?"

"We went to the States. My mother is an American citizen. Small town in Tennessee." Gary was now subdued. "You're right, his drinking got worse. He never worked again as a police officer. He did odd jobs for a while, but it got so he couldn't even attend to that."

Neither man spoke for a while. Then Greb asked, "What happened to your face?"

"You'll like this, being a moral man. I was playing guitar and singing in a roadhouse near town. And guess what? I was using

cocaine. At first I snorted. Then I started free-basing. There was a flash fire."

"Like what happened to Richard Pryor."

"Only my burns were worse than his." Gary closed his guitar case. "You don't have to arrest me. I kicked the habit during my year in the clinic."

When the singer picked up his instrument, Greb got to his feet. "You still haven't said why you came home."

"Can't you guess?"

"Revenge. You were laid up with burns and you had all that time to chew on what a bastard I was. How I caused all the Lomax troubles. You came back to settle the score."

"That about says it."

"You've heard what I have to say. What do you think now?"

As they left the studio, Gary said, "I don't know what to think."

A week later, at breakfast, Greb said to his daughter, "Those files are gathering dust."

"I may not complete the project," Natalie said. "It bores me." Both hands held the orange-juice glass and drinking it seemed to take all her attention. At last she said, "Gary isn't going to be the Phantom any more."

"The mystery is gone. The whole town knows who he is."

"He's composed a tune for the lyrics I wrote."

"You don't want to be involved with this guy. Take my word, Natalie. I've seen his face."

"I've seen burned faces. In England, there's a pilot who crashed in the Battle of Britain. He played a part in a movie about the RAF. Seeing his face is a shock at first. Then you begin to get used to it. He becomes just another man."

"You've got a major-league loser there, kid. He told me he's leaving town. Forget him."

"So what is this?" Ernie Kinney said. "Goodbye? After our brief but spectacular relationship?"

"I'm better off out of here," Gary said. "I thought I had to kill your Chief of Police. I was wrong."

"Heading back to the States?"

"I'm not sure where I'm going." Gary picked up an audio cassette from the desk. "Thanks for letting me record my song. Sure I can't pay you?"

"You don't owe me a thing." As the men headed for the front door, Kinney added, "Those are fine lyrics. You and Natalie might have a career together."

The eyes behind the mask looked straight at Kinney. "You read my mind. I was thinking of taking her with me."

Gary went to where his car was parked in the laneway beside the station. He stowed his guitar in the trunk, got behind the wheel, switched on, backed out, and drove away. He checked his watch. Natalie would be waiting at the Four Corners. He decided the best thing to do was think as little as possible. Just make the moves, drive the car. Play the music.

She waved as he approached. He slowed and stopped and she climbed in, slamming the door hard, turning to stare through the mask with an intensity that made him uncomfortable. He drove on and focused his attention on the street ahead.

"Is this it?" She picked up the cassette from the seat between them.

"That's our opus." He took it from her, tucked it into the aperture of the stereo player, and pressed the Play button. His guitar introduction came pouring from the speakers behind them in a tumble of notes like fountain water. Then his recorded voice said, "This is Natalie's song." And then it began to sing.

"Who do you think you are,
Breaking into my heart,
Going through 'all my feelings,
Tearing my soul apart?
Love is a kind of crime,
Better not go too far,
Nothing is gained for nothing—
Who do you think you are?"

She seemed to be holding her breath as the song played, her hands pressed together under her chin in an attitude of prayer. Lomax decided he was going to go ahead and do it. Chief Greb's big lie was the clincher, his statement that he had given Lothar Lomax a recommendation in writing. The son knew the opposite was true. When his father was still trying to make it, he applied for a police job in the Tennessee town. He was turned down. And on that occasion, he showed Gary the rejection letter. It said they had contacted Baytown and been told by Chief Greb that the former officer had been dismissed for taking bribes.

Greb was far more dishonest than Lomax's father. In secret, he filled his pockets from the gambling-house proceeds. He lied about the recommendation. And now he was manipulating Gary to get him out of town. It was time to even the score. A loved one for a loved one.

The music stopped playing. "It's so good!" Natalie was beside herself. "I had no idea it would sound like that. You've made my words sound terrific!"

"You wrote a fine lyric." Lomax was heading for the highway. He would tell her he was taking her to eat at a place near Three Mile Lake. There was a concrete overpass on the way. He would put the car into the wall at seventy miles an hour and they wouldn't feel a thing.

She was looking at the row of houses they were passing. "Gary, stop! This is where my friend Bev lives." She pressed the eject button and caught the cassette as it popped out. "Bev has to hear this." He pulled over to the curb. "Wait for me, I'll only be a few minutes."

She slammed the door and ran across the lawn to the grey stucco house with its frame of honeysuckle around the door. She was waving at him, hopping from one foot to the other, when the door opened and she hurried inside.

Alone in the car, Lomax surfaced out of the depths of his depression. He was surprised at how clear the situation had suddenly become. Like sun bursting through overcast. There was no way he could let himself kill Natalie, that blameless girl. Chief Greb was probably right about his father. He had been doomed all along, he was his own worst enemy. And so was Gary—like father, like son.

After all, nobody had forced him to free-base cocaine and destroy his face. He had done that to himself.

Lomax started the car and drove away from the house where Natalie and Bev were probably raving over her composition, playing it a second time. He would drive out to the cabin and pack his things, ready to leave town. That was his interim objective. Along the way, he would approach the concrete overpass. At that time, if he decided that only hatred and a desire for revenge were keeping him alive, then he would do what had to be done.

Maybe he should write more songs. Natalie's title kept running through Gary's mind. Who do you think you are?

DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Sylvia had one so-far-unreported flaw in her character. She loved her husband, yes—but there was one thing she loved more. Money...

MONEY AND MRS. MARKHAM

by **MARTIN WERNER**

If Jim Markham had died twenty-four hours later than he did, this story would have a different ending. Or maybe there wouldn't even be a story to tell. But Jim Markham did die—at precisely 6:33 P.M. on November 7, 1989, in the city of San Francisco. Next morning it was front page news, with an obituary that covered columns and columns of space.

Later that same day, the Berlin Wall began tumbling down—so that the next day's follow-up on Jim Markham's death rated only a paragraph or two on the back pages. Later that week, when the news from Europe took over everything, the Markham story disappeared completely.

But then there was nothing unusual about Jim's death. Everyone knew he'd been seriously ill for months and it was just a question of time. As the papers reported, he died peacefully in his sleep following a long illness. His only living survivor was his wife, Sylvia Markham. End of story.

And the end of an era, too, in a way. Jim Markham was one of those big, flamboyant lawyers San Francisco seems to be famous for. His firm—Markham, O'Neill and Lorenzo—accepted only the most prestigious, well heeled clients. His colorful cases were as famous across the country as they were in San Francisco. His whole lifestyle was the kind they make TV series about.

The setting and casting for the Markham story were perfect. America's most beautiful city. A handsome, wildly successful lawyer. And a perfect wife he adored—wise, witty, and absolutely stunning. Who could ask for anything more?

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Although the Markhams had been married for twenty-five years, nobody in San Francisco actually knew much about Sylvia. They knew the basics, of course—that she was from back East, born and raised in a small town outside Pittsburgh before she came West and married. Though another version had her growing up on a farm in Ohio, then winning a scholarship to the University. Sylvia was always vague about which one and when.

In the beginning of the marriage, when Jim was just another young attorney starting out down on Market Street, there were short visits from Sylvia's parents. (Jim's were both dead.) They usually came at Christmastime, stayed for a few days, then went back to wherever they came from. They didn't meet any of Jim and Sylvia's friends, or if they did they never made an impression on anyone. As the years passed, the visits became less and less frequent, then they stopped completely. Maybe because Jim and Sylvia didn't want any "interference" in his growing success.

But it wasn't until Jim had really become a name in the San Francisco legal profession, until "fun couple Syl and Jimmy Markham" began popping up in Herb Caen's column in the *Chronicle* and were photographed at this and that event in the society pages, that the rumors began. Then one or two people said they remembered seeing Sylvia years before she married Jim—L.A.? Las Vegas? Tahoe? One of those places. What had she been doing? Someone thought she was a cocktail waitress at one of the Vegas hotels. Another had her modeling and doing extra work in Hollywood.

It didn't matter. People will talk, and Jim and Sylvia ignored all of it. They became the shining jewels of the flashy new San Francisco society. Jim won a trial that made him a national celebrity and they bought the biggest, most impressive mansion on Russian Hill, spending millions on redecoration. After that, the collecting began—French Impressionists, British antiques, Paris couture, vintage cars. Nothing was too grand or too expensive. And the money kept rolling in.

Which was exactly the way Sylvia wanted it. Because Sylvia had one so-far-unreported flaw in her character. She loved Jim, yes—but there was one thing she loved more. Money.

Not just *loved* it. She *adored* it, dreamed about it, counted it like sheep before she fell asleep. She knew all the wonderful things money could do. The things it could buy for her. The long vacations. The servants. The big parties she could give in the big house on Russian Hill.

Jim didn't mind. He loved his work and supporting their lavish

style of living. Once in a while he spoke of wanting children, but Sylvia turned a deaf ear and the matter was dropped.

As time went on, Jim's friends noticed the change in his once good looks. He began to look tired and anxious—the fun seemed to be draining out of him. Then, after what seemed a routine ski accident, he didn't respond well to treatment and it became obvious he was a very sick man.

Though Sylvia was attentive, she seemed to bloom even more. The perfect wife? No question about it. But a few people—her household staff, her husband's business partners, and some others—knew the real Sylvia Markham. *That* Sylvia was greedy and calculating, everything the Sylvia on display was not. But for their own reasons, these people never talked.

Sylvia continued to be generous in her appearances at charities and benefits. But never once did she write a check for more than twenty-five dollars in their behalf. If Jim was bothered by this, he didn't let on. His whole world—except for Sylvia, of course—was still his work. "It's so much fun," he liked to say. Maybe it was. But it finally killed him.

If it was so easy to keep one secret in a marriage, how about two?

Jim had a brother that San Francisco society knew nothing about. Ralph. "Ralphie the Rat," he and Sylvia called him behind their closed doors.

Ralph was a couple of years younger than Jim and even looked something like him. But there the resemblance ended. Even back when they were growing up in Oakland, you could tell Ralph wasn't going to amount to much. He ran with a wild crowd, was expelled from high school, got in trouble stealing cars. He was married and divorced at twenty.

On his twenty-first birthday, Mom and Pop Markham gave him a very unusual present—his walking papers. He left the San Francisco scene and never came home again. As Jim got richer, Ralph drifted all around California, from one small-time job to another. He managed miniature-golf courses, sold a little cheap real estate, that sort of thing. And when times really got tough for him, he turned his hand to a bit of petty crime—nothing big, just enough to get him through the scrape. Of course, he followed Jim's success over the years and several times he tried to put the bite on him for a hundred bucks or so.

No dice. Jim was willing, but Sylvia kept the checkbooks. After the fifth or sixth rejection, Ralph gave up.

On the day of Jim's death, Ralph was working as the afternoon bartender in a little neighborhood joint in Fresno. A customer left a San Francisco newspaper behind on the bar and there on the front page was a picture of Jim and the headline: JAMES MARKHAM DEAD AT 63.

Ralph grabbed the paper and read the obituary quickly. He knew most of the details. The famous trials. The best-selling autobiography. The art collection. Then he studied the picture of Jim and Sylvia. The widow. The woman who was the "sole heir to the Markham millions."

Hey, wait a minute, Ralph said to himself. I know who she is. It's Dorothy Swallow. Vegas, 1961.

At the end of the afternoon, he gave up his job at the bar, went back to his room, and packed his bags. An hour later, he was on the early-evening bus to San Francisco. By the time he arrived there, his plans were made.

First, he checked into a small hotel off Union Square and called Jim's law partner, Fred Lorenzo.

Fred had known about Ralph for years, so it didn't seem unusual that he would be in town. Here for the funeral, probably. He gave Ralph all the details and told him how to get in touch with Sylvia.

Now that he had Sylvia's private phone number, Ralph lost no time calling her. A polite English butler answered. "May I speak to Mrs. Markham?" said Ralph.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the butler, "Mrs. Markham isn't taking any calls this evening."

Ralph rose to the occasion. "I think she might want to talk to me. Please tell her it's her brother-in-law, Ralph Markham."

After a few minutes, Sylvia was on the line.

"Ralph? Ralph, is that you? Where are you?"

She seemed kindness itself, until Ralph answered, "Not far from you, Sylvia. Maybe fifteen minutes. I'm downtown."

He could practically hear her catch her breath. "Well, Ralph. You know what's happened. This is a very bad time for me." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes, I know. That's why I'd like to come out to see you. Later this evening. After your friends have gone."

"See me about what?"

"I'd rather not talk about it on the phone, Sylvia. It's a family matter."

"Family? But—"

"Please, Sylvia. This is important."

"I'm sorry."

"Wait a minute, Sylvia. Wait a minute. It's just that I've got some papers of Jim's. He sent them to me a long time ago. He said he wanted me to give them to you in case anything ever happened to him. Or me."

He knew a story like that would get her. And sure enough, she said, "Well, I guess. Make it about eleven."

It was the opening Ralph was hoping for. He knew his sister-in-law was tough. But Dorothy Swallow wasn't.

Shortly after eleven, Ralph's cab pulled up at the mansion on Russian Hill. A simple wreath of mourning hung on the front door. The lights were burning on the first floor, but there wasn't a sound. Apparently the guests who had dropped by to comfort Sylvia had gone home.

Ralph could hear the door chimes inside as he pushed the button. A minute or so later, the butler opened the door and led him to the wood-paneled library. "I'll tell Mrs. Markham you're here," he said and left the room. The guy looked like he came from Central Casting, thought Ralph, turning to the Renoirs and Manets that lined the walls. They didn't mean much to Ralph. But the elegant room did. It reeked of money. Markham money.

Suddenly she was standing in the doorway, cool, elegant, her hand extended. She certainly had learned her manners.

"Ralph, I'm sorry we should have to meet like this—"

Words. Polite words.

So here she was at last. Just like the picture in the paper. Only now she was dressed for her role as the newly grief-stricken widow in a grey-chiffon dress and a single strand of pearls. Her eyes were ever so slightly reddened by tears. Perfect.

They sat, and after sharing a couple of memories of Jim she said, "When you called you said something about some papers of Jim's. What kind of papers?"

"Well," Ralph told her, "a long time ago—before the bad times between us—Jim made me some promises. He said that if he should die before I did, I should bring some stuff to you, things he'd saved. Things from the past. He said if I brought you this envelope, you'd make it worth my while."

Her smile froze. Her carefully cultivated voice took on a hard edge. "Wait a minute, what is this? Another one of your sleazy schemes?"

"Hey, hey—don't get dramatic, sis. These papers really don't amount to much. Just some old newspaper stories about my wicked past. You know—the kind of things that might stain the character of one of San Francisco's leading citizens."

"You must be kidding, Ralph. Nobody cares about that sort of thing in this day and age."

"Yeah, you're probably right. But there's one particular batch of family memories I think your San Francisco friends *would* like to see. Some pictures from the Vegas papers from the early Sixties."

Sylvia continued to look him straight in the eye.

"Yeah, Sylvia. Some pictures of five or six girls being rounded up in Vegas. Seemed the local police had been tipped off about them. They had a thing going—rolling a lot of guys who'd come to town for conventions. You know the kinds I mean. Guys who like to party a while, gamble, whatever. The police had been watching these bimbos for months."

"I still don't understand."

"One of them was named Dorothy Swallow."

"So?"

"So I was a bartender at the place Dorothy worked out of. I didn't know her personally, but a buddy of mine did. Fact is, he told me he even introduced her to my brother one time when he was in town on business. Next thing I knew, they were getting married, my brother and this hooker."

Ralph didn't expect her to crumble so quickly, but she did. A few tears, that was all. Then she said, "Okay, Ralph, you win. Of course those are pictures of me. I'd be a fool to deny it."

She has guts, he thought.

"Sure, I remember everything that happened back then. I think I even remember seeing you. But can't you see, all that's history. It's over. Jim helped me build a new life here. I don't want to lose that now."

"I wouldn't want you to, babe."

"I was a good wife, too. More than a wife—I was a partner. I helped Jim. He helped me. We made it together. You wouldn't destroy that after all these years with those crummy pictures."

"Of course not. What do you think I am, anyway?"

"I wish I knew."

"Sylvia, I didn't come here to smash your precious reputation—or my brother's. All I want is my little share of the family profits."

"Your *share*?"

"Yeah. Like I was your agent or something. Say ten percent?"

He saw her stiffen. Her reddened eyes went hard. From the rather simple Dorothy Swallow, she suddenly became Sylvia Markham again, the cold, calculating, money-hungry woman it had taken twenty-five years to create. What Ralph couldn't see was what was going on behind those eyes.

Then she started acting—again. "You win, Ralph, you win. We'll work something out. But not tonight. Please give me a little time. At least until tomorrow. After the funeral, we'll settle everything. Take my word."

"Fair enough."

"Only promise me you won't come to the service. It might look a little strange."

"Strange? How?"

"You know what I mean. The long-lost black-sheep brother. I can hear people saying, 'What's he doing here after all these years?' Please—go back to your hotel and check out, then come back. Get a good night's rest here tonight. Tomorrow you can hang around the house, use the pool and the sauna. Pick out some of Jim's clothes if you want. They're yours. Then tomorrow afternoon, when it's all over, we'll talk."

Too bad that Ralph Markham, after all these years, was still so naive. Or dumb. Or maybe he was just so greedy that anything Sylvia said seemed plausible. By now he'd believe anything as long as the bottom line was money.

He agreed to her plans. He'd stay the night and be the perfect house guest. Until the next evening—when he'd walk away with an agreement in his pocket.

The following day was one of the happiest Ralph had ever spent in his life.

Sylvia was picked up early by her friends, so Ralph had a chance to sleep until noon in a guest bedroom the size of some of the bars he had worked in. Then the English-type butler brought in his breakfast on a tray. After a few minutes, they even got to be friends. Sort of. Ralph was very good on short acquaintances.

After he dressed, Ralph explored the house. His brain ached from adding up what it was all going to be worth to Sylvia—and to him. In his brother's room, he checked out the London-tailored suits, shirts, and handmade shoes. Drawers and drawers of exquisite threads. Lucky we were always the same size, he thought.

During the afternoon, Ralph tried out the Olympic-size pool. Sylvia had said something about a sauna, so after his swim Ralph checked it out, found it hot and comfortable, and, removing his clothes, walked in and closed the big oak door behind him.

Putting a towel around himself, he stretched out on one of the wooden benches. He could feel the sweat begin to form. At last the tensions of the past twenty-four hours seemed to be melting away.

All over, thought Sylvia as she showed the few remaining guests to the door.

The funeral itself had been perfect, as perfect as any party she had ever planned. The flower-filled church. The simple graveside service. The few carefully chosen friends she had asked to accompany her back to the house. She managed to get rid of them as quickly as possible, though, because she knew Ralph would be lurking around somewhere and she didn't want to have to make any explanations about him.

The servants, too, were gone. She had dismissed them early so that she'd be completely alone to talk with her brother-in-law.

As she wandered from room to room, she expected to find the smiling Ralph at any moment. But he was nowhere to be seen. Then she remembered. The pool. The sauna.

She was right, of course. There he was, behind the closed door of the sauna. As she looked through the window in the door, she could see him sprawled out on one of the wooden benches, fast asleep.

Without a second thought, she located the set of dials that controlled the heating system inside the sauna. She turned them on full force. Hot. Hotter. Then, very carefully, she locked the door from the outside.

As she looked through the window again, she could see everything.

Ralph awoke with a start at the sudden onrush of heat. He was dripping wet and his skin had become dangerously red. With a great effort, he picked himself up from the bench where he had fallen asleep and rushed to the door to open it. It didn't move. He tried again, harder, and continued to shake the door handle and push against the door with his shoulder. He felt himself growing weaker and weaker from the overwhelming heat which enveloped him like a second skin. The only strength he finally had left was to open his mouth and scream for help. But of course nobody heard him. Except Sylvia . . .

Slowly, Sylvia climbed the stairs from the sauna to the third floor and the silence of her empty bedroom.

She entered and took off the beautiful black Givenchy gown she had worn for the funeral (ordered months before for the occasion). Peace at last, she murmured to herself.

No more Jim. He was safely buried. No more Ralph. He had died in the unfortunate "accident" in the hellish sauna heat. She'd wait a few more minutes, then go back downstairs, turn the heat back to normal, unlock the door, and call the police. Before that, though, she was going to make herself a very stiff drink.

As she was slipping into a robe, she heard the wail of a siren. She went to the window and saw that an emergency ambulance was pulling up at the front door, lights flashing. As two men jumped out, she made out the words on the side of the van: ACME STEAM AND SAUNA SQUAD.

There was a tremendous knocking and ringing at the front door. Sylvia flew down the stairs and opened the door. The men rushed past her and headed for the sauna. "Wait! Wait! What is it?" she cried.

"Emergency! Something's wrong with your heating system!"

And then she remembered—and stopped. Of course! Why hadn't she thought of it? Years ago when they had rebuilt the house, Jim had insisted on the best of everything. A state-of-the-art burglar-protection alarm. And—something new then—a safety system for the sauna. If the temperature inside were to rise past a certain limit, it would trigger an alarm that would alert the Steam and Sauna Squad located just minutes away. They would rush to the house to see what was happening. A flashing red light from Russian Hill to their address was the only signal that was needed.

And now they were here.

One of the men had turned off all the heating controls. The other was pulling Ralph from the hellishly hot room. Both were looking at Sylvia very curiously.

"Is he dead?" Her voice was so low they could barely hear her.

"He's still breathing. Maybe he'll be okay. But you'd better call the police and the medics and tell them to get over here."

No use hesitating—she walked blindly to the telephone and dialed 911.

Even then she knew Ralph wasn't going to die. And tomorrow would bring a whole new series of horrors. Looks. Questions. Accusations.

And blackmail. Ralph was no fool. He would know what she had tried to do. And he would never let her forget.

He'd ask for money to keep quiet. And she'd pay. Later, he'd ask for more—and she'd pay again. And this would go on and on until there was no more to give.

That was the thing about blackmail. It went on forever. Like a loveless marriage.



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a **NEW** short story by

DOUG ALLYN

Cass backed off a few feet and got Hawk focused while she checked her makeup in a hand mirror. She took out her handmike, nodded.

"Take one, Sliwa accident. A tragedy today, a fatal accident in—" She stopped, startled, glancing skyward as a sheet of rain-drops suddenly spattered. No, not rain. Somebody was spraying them with a garden hose from behind the garage.

Our first story (and a superlative one) from Doug Allyn since "Star Pupil" placed second in the 1989 EQMM Readers Award . . .

SLEEPER

by DOUG ALLYN

Cass shot the street sign first, held it in close-up for five seconds to give the location, then two seconds longer to give viewers time to cope with the Polish name. Kosciusko Street. He softened the focus on the sign a bit, bringing in the maple leaves above it, grey-green in the August heat, then panned the minicam slowly to the tackytack split-level tract house midway up the block. The house was a white clapboard box with faux-brick facing exactly like its neighbors, a row of baby boomers fading quietly into middle age. A white picket fence minus a slat here and there encircled the front yard, sorry as a gap-toothed grin.

Cass walked cautiously up the driveway, filming all the way, the shoulder-held Panasonic Steadycam smoothing his movements. Keeping the waning afternoon light at his back so he wouldn't need a sun gun, he zoomed through the open garage door, did a swooping pass over the battered old Chevy four-door parked inside, panned down to the hydraulic jack jammed under the front wheel hub, then

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ollowed the rusty rocker panels to the splayed, denim-clad legs protruding from beneath the car.

He zoomed a little closer, focusing the shot the way a human eye would see it but without blinking. He slid down the legs, tracing the pant seams past the frayed knees to the scuffed brown work shoes, then pulled the shot in even tighter, dropping it to the trickle of blood crawling away from the body, inching along a wayward crack down the concrete driveway. Beautiful.

Great stuff. He felt his breathing go shallow, the familiar sensual tightness in his chest, as he tracked the blood trail all the way out to the street. The blood gleamed black as oil in the Steadycam's viewfinder, but it would glow bright crimson on the Six O'Clock News. Linger on it would crowd the borderline of airtime standards-and-practices guidelines for early evening, but he didn't give a damn. It was dynamite film. Still, in TV news there's no such thing as too much footage; so he reshot the car and the legs beneath it from three more perspectives, shifting the shot every five to fifteen seconds, attention span of Mr. and Mrs. Average American tube spud.

He was filming the house from the driveway when the front door opened and Stephanie Hawkins came out with a stunned, chubby blonde in nurse's whites. The widow? Definitely was if she was married to the poor sonovabitch pancaked under the car. He shifted the lens back toward the garage, watching Hawk out of the corner of his eye for a signal that the woman had given permission to film, sure she'd get it. She nearly always did. Sympathy, empathy, anger, whatever it took, Hawk had it. She was the best newswoman Cass had worked with since he came back to Motown from the Coast, possibly the best in the Metro Detroit media market. Tall, slender, articulate, clear cafe-au-lait skin, great cheekbones, cool under fire. Too good, really, to stay at WVLTV much longer. A pity. Welcome to show biz, check your heart at the door. Hawk tapped the side of her purse as she took out her portable recorder mike. Okay to shoot.

Cass casually swung the Steadycam lens, following the neatly trimmed hedge to the small front porch, keeping his distance to avoid spooking the woman. No need to move closer, Hawk had positioned herself in good light, he could shoot them from the driveway. He zoomed in, centering the shot on Hawk first, then widening to the woman, trembling, haggard— Sweet Jesus!

The pallid, tear-streaked face in the viewfinder flashed from black-and-white to color, filling the lens. Sonya! It was Sonya! And the

guy under the car. Stan? It must've been! Holy Mary Mother of God— The lens started to blur.

Shoot it. It's not real, damn it, it's just TV. A photo op. Shoot it. Get the footage. His mouth was cotton-dry, blood pounding at his temples. But the lens never wavered, never blinked. And gradually Sonya's face reverted to being another image in the viewfinder again, losing her color, her reality, fading to black-and-white. She was mumbling responses to Stephanie Hawkins' professionally empathetic questions, but Cass could see she was in shock, out on her feet, dabbing helplessly at her streaming eyes, some snot on her upper lip. Running on empty. He kept shooting her, following the conversation with the camera's eye, hearing sirens in the distance now.

Hawk heard them, too, switched off her mike, said something to Sonya, and helped her stumble back inside, leaving the front door ajar for Cass. He finished the shot, hesitated, wondering whether he should go into the garage to check the body. No—whoever was under that car was dead. No question. And he already had all the footage he needed. He trotted up the sidewalk to the porch.

The living room was cramped and dim after the afternoon glare, too much stuff in it, a worn turquoise Sears sofa and matching easy chairs, sagging Lazyboy in front of the tube, knickknacks, figurines cluttering the end tables, cheap reproductions and family photos on the walls. He'd never been here, but the room was familiar, like the home he'd grown up in, or his friends' houses.

His friend. Stan. He didn't have to ask. A wedding picture of Stan and Sonya on the coffee table told him more than he wanted to know. Cass stood silent, invisible as his own ghost in an old friend's home. Half hiding behind his minicam, feeling the subsonic vibration of its gyro against his cheek, the comforting heartbeat hum of the machine. Not shooting, just—watching. Cool, detached, untouched. Until he noticed the car.

He'd been idly scanning the junk on the mantel over the gas-log fireplace: postcards, a bowling trophy, a framed snapshot of Stan, Sonya, and her younger brother—what was his name? Billy? No, Bobby. That was it. Twelve or thirteen when Cass last saw him, early twenties in the picture. The car was half hidden behind the snapshot. A plastic-and-steel model of a '57 Ford Skyliner hardtop convertible. My God.

He walked to the mantel, picked up the car, half hearing Sonya tell Hawk how she'd come home from work, found Stan in the garage,

called 911. Mint condition. The Ford's wheels still spun, perfectly balanced. The headlights worked. The hardtop retracted invisibly into the trunk better than the original ever had, thanks to Stan.

Months. He and Stan had handcrafted every single part of the little Ford in high-school machine shop. After school, between classes, whenever. Copped second prize at the Michigan State Fair. A phony silver cup and a fifty-buck savings bond. Cass had long since lost the cup somewhere. But Stan had kept—

"Cass?" He glanced up. Both Sonya and Hawk were staring at him. Sonya looked bloodless, ready to fall. "Cass? I don't understand. How did you get here? How did you know?"

"Sonya, I—didn't know. I'm a cameraman, WVLT News. We monitor police and EMS bands, we just heard the call. I'm sorry, I can't tell you how sorry I am—"

An EMS van howled to a halt in the driveway, doors slamming, men charging into the garage.

"Oh," Sonya said, "seeing you there I thought I must be asleep, that— Oh, God. Stan—" Sonya lost it, broke down completely, dropped her face to her knees, wailing, covering her head with her forearms like a child trying to avoid a beating.

"Mrs. Sliwa? Sonya?" One of the EMS attendants rapped on the door once, stepped in without waiting, knelt awkwardly beside her, took her hand. "Sonya? You okay?" He was tall, rangy, reddish thinning hair, freckled face, thick wrists. He kept swallowing hard, eyes misty, struggling to keep himself together. He glanced vaguely at Hawk, blinking in confusion as he tried to place her. And he noticed Cass. And the WVLT logo on the minicam.

"Hey, what the hell is this?" he said slowly, rising. "What are you people doing in here?"

"Mrs. Sliwa invited us in. I'm Stephanie Hawkins—"

"I know who you are. I asked what the hell you're doing here. Christ, the cops aren't even here yet and you're already tryna get a goddamn interview? You get the hell outa here, the botha ya!"

"Charlie, please," Sonya quavered, "it's all right. I—"

"No, it ain't all right! Goddamn vultures! Damn it, clear out, lady, now or I'll kick your black ass all the way back to Motown where you belong. Now move it!"

"Hey," Cass said, setting the camera aside, "just cool down, buddy, that's enough!"

"It's all right, Cass," Stephanie said, rising. "The gentleman's

upset and it's time to go, anyway. Mrs. Sliwa, I'm very sorry about your loss—"

"Keep your sympathy, lady," Charlie said. "Stan was nothin' to you but a couple minutes on TV. G'wan, get outa here."

"Okay, okay," Cass said, shouldering the camera, opening the front door. "Miss Hawkins, ma'am?"

Hawk hesitated, standing her ground in front of Mister Charlie for a moment, then stalked out past Cass without a word.

"Sonya?" Cass said. "I'm sorry as hell, you know that. I'll call you later." He glanced back from the doorway. Charlie was on his knees again, holding Sonya's hands. He wasn't crying, but he wasn't far from it.

A blue-and-white patrol car, flashers on, pulled in and parked beside the EMS van. Local Warsaw Heights cops. A salt-and-pepper team, Misiak and Jackson. Big and Bigger. Cass knew them from other crime scenes in the Heights—a shooting, a dope bust.

"*Jak sie mas, bracia*, Meesh," Cass said, "how you doin'?"

"Don't gimme that homeboy stuff, Novak," Misiak said, "I only speak Polish to my mother. You guys already interview the lady who called?"

"Afraid so."

"Damn it, Novak, you know you people been warned about doin' interviews at a crime scene before the police—"

"No offense, officer," Hawk interrupted coldly, "but it's not our fault you can get a pizza delivered in this town faster than you can get a cop. This isn't a crime scene until you tie it off, and we're accredited members of the press with First Amendment rights. If you've got a problem with that, I'd love to hear it. On camera, of course. You feel like an interview?"

Misiak glared at her a moment, then shrugged. "Nah, just lemme do my job, stay outa the way, okay?"

"And is harassing the press part of your job?"

"No, ma'am," Misiak said, "mostly we just hang out at Dunkin' Donuts and snooze in the booths. In between gang fights and drive-by shootin's. 'Scuse me, I got next of kin to talk to, assumin' she feels like talkin' to anybody *else*." Misiak stamped off toward the front door. His partner, Walker Jackson, finished talking to the EMS medic in the garage and wandered over.

"Nice work, Miss Hawkins, ma'am," he drawled softly, "nother milestone in police/press relations. What's the problem?"

"No problem," Hawk said, "it's just—hell, it's not your fault. Is this situation pretty much how it looks?"

"I'd say so," Jackson nodded. "Guy working under his car, the jack lets go, weight of the car suffocates him. We get two or three a summer. What'd the wife say?"

"That she came home from work, found him like that. They've had some junkie burglaries in the neighborhood, always keep the house locked. Guy was a wonderful husband, everybody liked him. Like that."

"Lady seem straight to you?"

"Absolutely. She's a basket case about it. Cass knows them, though. Anything to add, Novak?"

"No," Cass said. "Straight people. Good people." He coughed, his eyes stinging.

"Right," Jackson nodded. "Well, I guess that covers it. Buy you a drink after work, *Miz Hawkins*?"

"In your dreams, Jackson," Hawk said. But she smiled a little as he sauntered back into the garage.

"Cass," she said carefully, "you *did* know this guy, right? A friend?"

"Yeah, a friend. A good friend. In high school. About a thousand years ago."

"Well, no offense to your friend, but all we've got here is local interest, two minutes tops, C-bag."

"Maybe not that much. The story'll probably get bumped altogether if anything happens in the Middle East. You want me to try for a better shot when they remove the body?"

"That won't be necessary," Hawk said, eyeing him oddly.

"Look, don't worry about me—you want the footage of the body, I'll get it."

"I believe you. We just don't need it, okay? Let's shoot a stand-up in front of the house and that'll cover it. You ready?"

"Sure." He backed off a few feet and got Hawk focused while she checked her makeup in a hand mirror. She took out her handmike, nodded.

"Take one, Sliwa accident. A tragedy today, a fatal accident in—" She stopped, startled, glancing skyward as a sheet of raindrops suddenly splattered. No, not rain. Somebody was spraying them with a garden hose from behind the garage. Cass had an idea who.

"This is Stephanie Hawkins, WVLT-TV," Hawk continued coolly into the camera, ignoring her wilting hair, the water dripping down

her face, "signing off from soggy, scenic Warsaw Heights and getting my butt back to Motown where I belong."

Novak went straight to the fridge when he got back to his apartment, rescued a couple of joints from his stash in a box of frozen waffles. He went into the living room, shucked his shoes, and eased down crosslegged on a futon in front of the tube. Left it dark. Turned himself on instead. Fired up the first doobie, sucked the Lebanese smoke deep into his lungs, holding it, feeling the buzz spread out from his chest, mellowing him out. Better. Not good, but better. By the time Hawk wandered in half an hour later, he was medium-mellow, cloud seven, maybe seven and a half.

"What's going on?" Hawk said. She stepped out of her heels at the door, set her briefcase on the dining-room table, then sat on the couch, folding her legs under her.

"Nothing's going on. Bad day."

"I had most of the same day, plus a staff meeting at the end of it. Which you skipped."

"I wasn't in the mood. Anybody notice?"

"Only the assignment editor. I told him you were drunk in a ditch. Seems I wasn't far off. I thought we agreed you were through smoking dope in the apartment."

"Stefania, dark goddess of my soul, you know I would gladly lay me down and die for you," he said, taking another hit, holding the smoke, "but don't get in my face. Please."

"I'll get out of your goddamn life you don't tell me what's up in about thirty seconds, Novak. Make up your mind, while I've still got time to meet Jackson for a drink."

"Since you put it so tactfully. You remember me talking about a friend from high school, the guy who introduced me to the sacred logic of machines, got me my first job on a newspaper?"

"Nope, afraid not."

"That was him today—Stan Sliwa. Under that car."

"I see," she said slowly. "I'm sorry. Wait a minute—best friend? The one who married your high-school sweetheart? Her father was a big shot on the paper or something?"

"He owned the paper, but it was no big deal since it was only a Polish-language weekly. And how come you don't remember Stan but you remember who he married?"

"I am woman, hear me roar. Only if this guy was such a good

friend, why haven't you seen him since you came back? Warsaw Heights is only what, fifteen, twenty minutes out of Motown?"

"Twenty minutes, a dozen years. I guess I should have called him. But you can't go home again, or so I've heard. Maybe I was afraid to find out if it's true."

"Or maybe you were afraid to see the best friend's wife. Old flames burn the brightest, they say."

"Who says? Smokey Robinson?"

"I think it was Waylon Jennings," she said, picking up the remote control, flicking on the tube and the VCR. "Time for the news."

"I'm not sure I want to see this."

"Tough. If you're too stoned to take a walk, close your eyes. I want to see it. Strictly business, okay?"

A-bag, the first segment of the broadcast, was a tenement blaze in Dearborn.

"Damn," Hawk said, "I was hoping the drive-by shooting we covered would cop the first slot."

"Nah, the burn has better footage. Nice lookin' fire. Good color."

The Detroit drive-by was next. Two corpses, one a small boy in a Pistons T-shirt, were sprawled in a doorway off the Corridor while Hawk did the stand-up in front of the crack house. "Damn it, Cass, what the hell is on my face? I look like I've got leprosy."

"Shadows, darlin'—you were standing near a tree. Don't worry, it makes you look even more interesting. It's a good shot."

"For an art gallery, maybe. I'm not a model, Cass, I'm a reporter, and I'll never make anchor looking like Typhoid Mary."

B-bag was a millage vote, a Greek festival in Hart Plaza. Lame stuff. C-bag was a fluff piece on the U of D mascot. And then Stan. Cass sucked down the last of the joint, ground out the roach. Street sign, street, garage, car, body. Hawk talking to Sonya on the porch.

"All due respect, your long-lost love could lose a few pounds," Hawk said.

"So could Liz Taylor. Roll that back, show me the garage. I screwed it up somehow."

"It looks all right to me. Mmm, good shot of the blood. Looks alive."

"No, before that. Hell, take it from the top." Street sign, street, garage—"Freeze it. Right there. The car."

"What about it?"

"I don't know, but something—"

"I don't see anything. It's just a car. Pretty ordinary."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" he said, blinking, trying to clear away the fog. "Old Chevy four-door, Michigan cancer holes in the rocker panels. A junker. So what was Stan doing under it?"

"Fixing it. What else?"

"Yeah—" Cass nodded slowly "—only why bother? It's a ten-year-old beater. Stan wasn't just a putzer, he was a master mechanic—hell, he was state certified when he was sixteen. I'm damn handy with machinery, but Stan was an artist. So why is he working on a piece of crap like that? It'd cost more for parts than it's worth. The tires alone are probably worth more than— That's what's wrong with the shot."

"What, the tires? What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing, they look new. And they're not stock, either. Footprint's too wide. Racing tires. Exhaust could be oversize, too."

"Maybe he was turning it into a hot rod or something."

"Not that car. Wrong type. It's a four-door—more weight, weaker frame. Any two-door would be better."

"But don't guys sometimes soup up ordinary-looking cars for street racing?"

"A sleeper, you mean?"

"A what?"

"They're called sleepers. A car that looks normal on the outside but it's tricked out under the hood. Same problem. Wrong type of car."

"Even so, what difference does it make now?"

"None," Cass said, flicking off the tube, easing to his feet. "But it bothers me. I, ah, I think I'll go over there."

"To see the car?" Hawk said evenly. "Or to comfort the grieving widow?"

"Look, the guy was a friend, okay? They both were. If you're worried, you're welcome to come along."

"No, thanks, I've seen as much of Polish Harlem as I care to for one day. Weather's too damp there. The only thing that worries me is that you've burned a couple of joints and it's bad for your short-term memory."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing heavy. Only, while you're checking out this—sleeper of yours, try to remember where *you* sleep, okay?"

"Darlin'," he said, slipping on his sportcoat, "when our thing crashes, you'll be the one who walks away, not me. Anyway, not to worry. You're right—the lady could stand to lose a few pounds."

"Not so many," Hawk said. "She still looked pretty good."
"Yeah—" he nodded "—she did, didn't she?"

A half dozen cars were parked in Stan's driveway when Cass pulled up in the WVL mini van. Charlie Bennett, the angry EMS attendant, answered the door. He'd traded his uniform for civvies, a dark ready-to-wear suit that looked a size too small for his large frame. "Well, well, if it isn't the rainmaker," Cass said, "you here on a house call?"

"I'm a friend of the family," Bennett said. "Look, about this afternoon—I was upset, I didn't realize you were a buddy of Stan's. I called over to the station there to apologize but you'd already gone. I was outa line, I'm sorry. Fair enough?" He offered his hand.

"I guess so," Cass said, accepting it. "It was a lousy situation, anyway. How's Sonya holding up?"

"Not too bad, considering. It probably hasn't sunk all the way in yet." Bennett stood aside, ushering Cass in. "A few friends and neighbors came over to sit with her, brought a ton of food, some beer. Everybody's down in the family room."

Cass followed him through the cramped living room to the foyer, where the split level divided. A young guy in ragged jeans and a grimy T-shirt was coming down the stairway from the upstairs bedrooms carrying suitcases. He was almost concentration-camp gaunt with the same vacant stare, spiky hair the color of moldy hay, ragged stubble of beard. And vaguely familiar.

"Bobby?" Cass said, but the boy ignored him, brushed past, headed for the front door.

"That *was* Sonya's little brother, right?" Cass asked Bennett. "God, he was just a kid the last time I saw him. I guess he didn't remember me."

"Don't feel bad, he doesn't remember his own name half the time," Bennett shrugged.

"He moving out?"

"I wouldn't know," Bennett said, and his tone made it clear he didn't care. Cass followed him downstairs into the family room. And twenty years back in time.

The "family room" was a recycled basement, plastic oak-paneling, cheap carpet, Sears washer and drier at one end. A few dozen people were standing around, groups of older men in shirtsleeves, dark slacks, conversing in lowered tones. Housewives in plain print dresses were clustered near a Ping-Pong table laden with enough

food for a Polish division, the air delicious with aroma of duck's blood soup, *golumpki*, cabbage rolls, *budyn z szykni*, steaming ham pudding. Two heavyset older women were filling plates, passing them out. As Cass scanned the room looking for Sonya, he noticed he was catching a lot of stares, a few frowns, and realized he was the only person in the room not dressed somberly. In his white Armani sportcoat, peach shirt, faded jeans, he was a flamingo in a flock of starlings. Terrific. He spotted Sonya in the corner of the room with a few women friends and started over.

"Kazu? Is that you?" An ancient gnome of a man in a rumpled black suit levered himself up from a metal chair against the wall and hobbled toward him, leaning on an aluminum cane. Ignace Filipiak, Sonya's father.

"Mr. Filipiak, how are you?" Cass said, embracing the old man gently, afraid he might shatter him. "You look good."

"I look like a stomped pissant," the old man smiled, "but you, you look good, Kazu. Well and prosperous. Sonya tells me you're working for the TV now."

"That's right. I was here, ah, this afternoon. I'm very sorry about Stan, Mr. Filipiak, he was a good man."

"He was, he was." The old man nodded. "It's a terrible thing what happened. Funny—putting out the paper over the years, you see so many things you think it makes your soul as dried out as leather, tough, invulnerable. Then a thing like this—" His eyes were swimming, but he swallowed the pain, shrugged it off. "It must be hard for you, too, Kazu. You and Stanley were good friends, back when you worked for me."

"Yes, sir, we were."

"But you don't see him since you come back to town. You don't come around the old neighborhood. You ashamed of us, Kazu?"

"No, sir, of course not. But my folks are gone now—you lose touch, you know?"

"Yah, I know. The Heights isn't like it used to be, anyway, so many plants closing, no work. White Harlem they call it now, people on the welfare or moving away or mixed up in the *holjeda*."

"The *holjeda*? The plague? I don't understand."

"You know—the drugs, the crack. It's here, too, like everywhere else where people lose heart. In the war, the Nazis took young people for the slave-labor camps. This crack *holjeda* is like that, except the young people volunteer to die. I don't understand it, Kazu. Maybe I'm just too old."

"I don't think anybody understands it, Mr. Filipiak. And you don't seem older to me."

"I am, though," the old man sighed. "I'm feel like I'll be two hundred my next birthday, maybe more. And I talk too much. You go talk to Sonya, Kazu. She needs her friends now. If this TV job doesn't work out, you come see me. You can have your old job on *Populsku Warsaw Heights* anytime."

"You're still publishing the paper?" Cass asked, surprised.

"Of course. It's only bi-weekly now, not so many people read Polish in the Heights any more, but I'm still in the same building, still spend more time in the coffee shop downstairs than at work. Come by, see me sometime, we'll talk like the old days."

"I will, Mr. Filipiak—soon, I promise."

"You're a good boy, Kazu Novak, you always were. You and Stanley were—" He winced, blinking rapidly, then turned and hobbled back to his chair against the wall. And suddenly the room seemed too close, filled with too many people, memories. Cass forced himself to glance around, bleeding the color out of the picture, seeing everything in black-and-white now, mentally filming the scene, the people. Sonya was surrounded by friends, looking lost, dazed. A pity he didn't have a camera. It would have made a great shot.

He turned away, went back upstairs, through the kitchen to the garage. He switched on the lights and stepped out on the small landing, took a deep, ragged breath, glanced around.

In the cold glare of the overhead fluorescents, the garage seemed doubly empty. No car, no jack. The tools had been returned neatly to the racks above the workbench, the bloodstains washed away. As though nothing had happened here. Nothing.

"What are you doing out here?" Charlie Bennett said, stepping out onto the landing.

"I wanted to see something. What happened to the car?"

"The police took it. The car and the jack both. For testing, I guess."

"I can see why they might want to test the jack, but why take the car?"

"How the hell would I know? I thought you came here to see Sonya, but instead you're out here snoopin' around. What's the matter, you didn't get enough pictures today? Maybe you just better take a hike, mister *newsman*."

Cass glanced up at him. A big guy, Bennett, half a head taller, forty pounds heavier. Angry. And pushy. But standing with his back to the landing stairs, four steps down to a cement floor. Cass could

see himself giving Bennett a stiff jab to the belly, dumping his big ass down the stairs, see how pushy he felt when he got up. If he got up. But the moment passed. Wrong time, wrong place. Or at least that's what Cass told himself, walking out to his car.

The Warsaw Heights police station was nearly new, brick fronted, white-tile floors, built a dozen years ago when G.M. bought the old station and half the downtown area to build a new auto plant, which closed eight years later. Cass inquired at the front desk and was directed to a corner office, glass walled, overlooking the brightly lit parking lot.

"Have a seat, Mr. Novak, what can I do for you?" Lieutenant Gil Delacruz was balding, moon-faced. Brown suit, black bowtie. His desk was piled with paperwork and the remains of a Chinese takeout supper. He looked like a history teacher from a small college.

"You're the officer in charge of the Sliwa case?" Cass said, easing down on the metal folding-chair facing. "I thought you worked narcotics?"

"Do I know you?"

"I'm a cameraman for WVLT. I've filmed you at crime scenes a couple of times."

"I see," Delacruz nodded, munching the last of an eggroll. "I thought you looked familiar. Anyway, here in the Heights, the department's not divided quite as neatly as in Metro Detroit. The Sliwa death happened on my shift, so I caught it. But there's no case, it's already closed, accidental death. Unless you've got information to volunteer?"

"No, just a couple of questions. Like what happened?"

"The jack apparently let go, the decedent suffocated."

"Apparently?"

"We've impounded it, it'll be shipped to the police lab at Lansing and checked out in case there's a product-liability civil suit, but most likely Mr. Sliwa just mis-set the jack and it slipped."

"Stan was a licensed master mechanic. It's hard for me to believe he'd make a mistake with something as basic as a jack."

"There were a few empties near the body, and I expect the autopsy will show the decedent killed a couple beers, screwed up. Why the interest? I thought you people ran your story on the Six O'Clock News."

"It's personal. Stan was a friend."

"I see. Well, there's not much more I can tell you. The widow said

the house was locked, no sign anyone else had been there. Sliwa died around two, while she was still at work. I checked."

"I saw her brother, Bobby Filipiak, tonight. He seemed to be moving out."

"From what I understand, Bobby Flip and his brother-in-law got along fine. You have any reason to think otherwise?"

"No, I just—"

"I didn't think so. Look, Mr. Novak, I cut you some slack because I figure you're upset over the death of a friend, but you're a little out of line here. Your friend had too many beers, made a mental error—end of story. We don't have the manpower or the high-tech goodies in the Heights that Detroit Metro has, but we're not incompetent."

"I didn't say you were."

"No, but you must think so. Otherwise why would you walk into my office with reefer smoke on your clothes and think I wouldn't notice? I'll tell you something, Novak—I don't like newspeople much—they get underfoot, interview witnesses before I get to them, and generally make my job tougher—and I especially don't like yuppie potheads because you contribute to the cash flow of scumbags who are screwing up the world. Any other questions before you go?"

"Just one," Cass said, rising warily, "do you know what Stan was doing to the car?"

"No. What difference does it make?"

"Probably none. I just wondered. Can I see it?"

"The car? I guess you can try."

"What does that mean?"

"We don't have it. I just had it towed away as a courtesy to the widow. Rostenkowski's Scrapyard took it. I imagine it's the size of a suitcase by now. Anything else, Novak, or should I ask the desk sergeant to shake down your car for your stash?"

"No," Cass said, "don't bother. I'll see myself out."

And that was it. Cass went to Stan's funeral stoned to the bone, overdosed on vodka and memories at the wake afterward, lost his lunch out in the alley behind Dom Polski Hall. A few weeks later, he also lost Hawk. She got a promotion to Morning News anchor and moved back to her own place. They promised to remain friends, to stay in touch, then avoided each other like death. He got a new partner, an earnest kid fresh out of CMU named Metcalf. Cass nicknamed him Cowbell, but worked hard at showing him the ropes. It

seemed to help. The pain of loss faded as the weeks passed, and after a month he only thought of Hawk once or twice an hour, and Stan hardly at all. Until Sonya called, said she'd sold the house, thought he might like some of Stan's tools.

He almost didn't go.

It was seven when he arrived. The garage door was closed, a Century 21 Sold sign stood in the overgrown front yard, but otherwise things looked much the same as that first terrible day. He rang the doorbell. Sonya answered, and for a moment neither of them spoke, eyeing each other through the screen door. Across half a lifetime.

"So," he managed at last, "how are you doin'?"

"Better than you were the last time I saw you. Come on in."

"You look terrific," he said, following her in, and she really did. She'd dropped a dozen pounds and seemingly a dozen years. In designer jeans, a T-shirt, and running shoes, her figure firm, her hair lightened and tousled, she looked more like the girl from Pulaski High than the shattered widow of a few months ago. "I called you a couple of times, never caught you."

"I've—been gone a lot," she said, opening the door to the garage and stepping out on the landing. "I didn't want to be here while they were showing the place, you know? As far as I know, everything's the way Stan left it. Take whatever you like."

"Are you sure? Some of these tools are expensive."

"It's all right, I have no use for them, and Charlie—" She coughed. "Anyway, Stan would want you to have them."

"Charlie?" Cass said, walking down the steps to the workbench, pointedly avoiding her eyes. "You and Charlie an item now?"

"I know it might seem like I'm rushing things a little," she said, sitting down on the steps, watching him, "but I'm not. I won't lie to you, Cass, I've been seeing Charlie for—a while."

"I see," he said, sliding open a drawer. Vise grips, a complete set, arranged by size, each one lightly oiled.

"I doubt that you do. You've been away a long time, Cass, people change. God knows I loved Stan, but he wasn't the easiest guy in the world to live with. He was—dull. Maybe not to you, you two could always talk about cars, or cameras, or some damned helicopter motor you read about in *Popular Mechanics*, but what do you think we talked about? Machinery was all he really cared about."

"You're wrong. He cared about you." He opened another drawer. Allen wrenches, standard, metric—

"I suppose he cared about me as much as he cared about anything that wasn't gear-driven," she conceded. "Maybe if we'd had kids it would've been different."

"Why didn't you?"

"I can't have children," she said simply, "ever. And Stan would have made a wonderful father. Maybe that's why he stayed so distant. Because I was broken and he couldn't order a part or tune me up to solve the problem."

"You know he didn't feel like that."

"No, the truth is I don't know how he *really* felt about anything. When things got tense between us, he'd just come out here and crawl under a car, or bury his nose in a manual. The funny thing was, I thought Bobby might help. What a joke."

"How so?"

"Have you seen Bobby lately?"

"I saw him here the, ah, the night of Stan's accident. He was carrying a couple of suitcases."

"Right," she said bitterly. "Know what was in them? Our silverware, a couple of Stan's handguns, anything he could pawn for a few bucks. A real prize, my little brother. Killed our mother being born and he's gone straight downhill ever since, in and out of jail, you name it, he's done it. He's just a damned junkie now, steals to support his habit. The last time he got out of detox my father wouldn't have him in the house, couldn't handle him any more, so Stan and I took him in."

"But it didn't work out?" Another drawer, chromed-steel socket sets, ratchet arms, extensions, silent, gleaming.

"It almost did." She leaned on the rail, resting her chin on her palm. "They spent a lot of time together. Stan taught Bobby about tools, thought if he put a wrench in his hand it might straighten him out. They completely rebuilt Bobby's car, and for a while it seemed to be working. Stan was sure it was—I mean, how could anybody who understands the guts of an engine do dope?"

"What happened?" Cass opened a storage cabinet stacked with large boxes and peered in to read the labels. Street Dominator intake manifolds for big block Chevys, six sets of them. Six Holley dual-feed carburetors to match.

"Bobby drove it around till the kick of having the fastest wheels on the street wore off, then he traded it for dope money, got so trashed he almost died, wound up in the hospital, and then in jail."

And when he got out, Stan let him come back. Just didn't believe there was anything he couldn't fix. What's wrong?"

Cass didn't answer for a moment, trying to make sense of what he was seeing, then realized Sonya was eyeing him, shaking her head. "Sorry," he said. "Where were we?"

"I was talking about Bobby—I don't know where you were. Stan used to do that to me all the time, drift away. I'd be talking to him and realize he wasn't hearing a word, he was off inside a transmission or something. I forgot how much alike you two were."

"Yeah, well maybe he wasn't perfect, who is? But not many guys would've bothered trying to straighten Bobby out. I wouldn't have. I doubt Charlie would, either. Are you, ah, sure you're doing the right thing, being involved with him so soon?"

"Hell no, I'm not sure," she snapped, "how could I be? I've never been in this situation. I think I would have left Stan eventually, but—" she swallowed hard, blinking back tears "—but not before we'd fought it out, gotten things straight between us. Not like this," she said, rising suddenly, her eyes streaming, "not like this." She turned and walked back into the house, slammed the door.

Cass thought about following her, but couldn't think of a damn thing to say. Maybe she was right, he and Stan were too much alike, better with machinery than people. He began opening the boxes in the closet. Four of the Holley dual-feed-carburetor boxes contained used carbs off older cars. What the hell?

"What's goin' on out here?" Charlie Bennett said. "Soni came in bawling her eyes out. What did you say to her?"

"It was a private conversation," Cass said, opening one of the Street Dominator boxes. "If you want to know, you'll have to ask her."

"I asked you, Novak, or Polack, whatever your name is, but I don't much care. I didn't like you from day one. I want you outa here."

"Sonya invited me here and I'm not quite finished," Cass said, replacing the last Dominator box, "so why don't you cool down a little and back off."

"That's the trouble with you TV guys," Bennett said, stalking angrily down the steps, slamming the cabinet door in Cass's face, "you're outa touch with reality. Like a guy your size tellin' a guy my size to back off. I told you to get steppin', mister. I mean right now."

"You know, Stan Sliwa was a friend of mine once," Cass said, rising, glancing idly around the garage. "Sonya thinks we're a lot

alike." He took a twenty-inch crescent wrench out of its drawer, hefted it, checking the balance. "For instance, Stan thought you can fix damn near anything, you use the right tool. How about it, Charlie? You see anything out here needs fixing?"

Bennett hesitated, glancing at the wrench, then at Cass, then the wrench again. "Maybe not now," he said evenly. "No need to disturb the lady."

"Good point," Cass nodded. "Now why don't you just go back in the house? I'd like to be alone."

"I'll let it pass this time, Novak," Bennett said from the safety of the landing, "but when you leave, you'd better not come back."

"Not to worry," Cass said, taking a last look around the empty, immaculate garage, "nobody lives here any more."

The Jury's Inn was busy and dim, the usual mix of cops, bailiffs, and bondsmen from the Heights Hall of Justice down the street. The air was thick with smoke and the din of a dozen simultaneous conversations, dishes clattering, a jukebox thumping Motown goodies against one wall. Cass found Lieutenant Gil Delacruz sitting alone at a corner table cluttered with empty beer mugs, an overflowing ashtray.

"They told me at the desk you might be over here. Got a minute?" Cass asked. "It's important."

Delacruz frowned up at him blearily, trying to place the face. "Hey, I know you," he said at last. "Novak the pothead cameraman, right? Hate to be rude, but since I'm off duty, whyn't you just go away, okay?"

"Thanks, I appreciate it," Cass said, pulling up a chair facing Delacruz. "You remember the Stan Sliwa case?"

"I vaguely remember a Sliwa accident," Delacruz slurred. "The case of the Polish pancake, no?" He grinned, then sobered a little as his eyes met Cass's. "Sorry, forgot he was a friend of yours. Okay, what about it?"

"I was in Stan's garage earlier tonight, and I came across something odd. I found sixty-grand worth of bolt-on racing gear for Chevy engines there—enough equipment to trick out a half dozen cars like the one that killed him."

"So I guess your buddy was heavy into hotrods, so what?"

"Damn it, Delacruz, I said sixty thousand dollars' worth of equipment. Stan was a blue-collar guy, he didn't have that kind of money. And nobody builds six cars at once."

"Did I miss somethin' here? I thought you just said that's what he was doin'. What's your point?"

"It's one that I don't like much," Cass said, taking a deep breath. "You allowed you know Bobby Filipiak, Stan's brother-in-law. A while back Stan tried to straighten Bobby out, built a car for him. Bobby dumped it for dope money, wound up back in jail."

"Sounds like Bobby. So?"

"So I think maybe that car impressed some of the people Bobby did business with. And they did a deal with Bobby or Stan to build a half dozen more just like it. But not just hot rods, sleepers."

"You're saying your buddy Sliwa was buildin' fast cars for the drug trade, that it? Nice guy, your friend."

"He was, but—damn it, he was having trouble in his marriage, maybe he needed money, I just don't know. But from the spare parts I found, I'd guess Stan had already built at least three cars, was working on the fourth. If you can find the cars—"

"Catch 22," Delacruz grinned, finishing off a beer.

"What?"

"Catch 22. Even if your buddy was buildin' sleepers, we can't prove it because we can't find 'em. 'Cause they're sleepers. Catch 22. Get it?"

"Jesus," Cass sighed, slumping back in his chair, "what I get is you're about half in the bag. Maybe I'd better try you another time."

"Nah, let's settle this now. Look, you're buggin' me because you want me to do something, right? Okay, like what? Let's say I could find the cars your buddy built. Then what? It's not illegal to own a fast car, even if you're a dope dealer. Way I see it, if he was building hot cars for the dope trade and one of 'em fell on him, I got no problem with it. Poetic justice, no?"

"The problem is that I don't think the car did just fall on him."

"No? Why not?"

"It's hard to explain, but being in Stan's workshop tonight, seeing the way he kept his tools, those old carbs cleaned up and reboxed even though they were almost worthless. I could set a jack wrong, or you could. But not Stan. He just couldn't make a dumbass mistake like that. I think maybe somebody dropped that car on him."

"No kidding? And who do you figure did the taxpayers this favor?"

"Maybe the dopers he was working for. Maybe Bobby. Hell, maybe his wife's new boy friend, I don't know. But neither do you, and you should. It's your job to know, or to find out."

"My job?" Delacruz said, flushing dangerously. "You come in here

gettin' in my face after I put in a sixteen-hour day, and now you wanna gimme a lecture on how to do my damn job?"

"Look, all I'm saying is I think—"

"I don't give a damn what you think!" Delacruz roared, staggering to his feet, weaving. "I listened to your sad story, now you listen to mine! I'll try to explain it so even a punkass yuppie pothead can understand." He cleared the table with his forearm, trashing the beer mugs and the ashtray on the hardwood floor, then jerked a handgun out of a shoulder holster and leaned unsteadily on the table, holding the muzzle an inch from the tip of Novak's nose.

"Jesus Christ, Delacruz," somebody said, but otherwise the room fell absolutely silent. Only the jukebox kept pumping. The Temptations. "My Girl."

"You know what this is, Novak?" Delacruz said, blinking, trying to focus. "It's a piece of machinery, a nine-millimeter Taurus Model 92 automatic. It's brand new, but it's not all that complicated. For instance—" he cocked the hammer with an audible snick "—you just pull the trigger, it'll fire sixteen rounds *boom boom boom* fast as you can squeeze 'em off. Twin safeties, safe as houses, you know? But last year a State Police firing-range officer, a twenty-year man who handles guns for his damn living, shot himself in the foot out in Highland Park. We don't know how it happened. Hell, *he* don't know what happened, it just happened. That's why they call 'em accidents. Like what happened to your buddy. Like what could happen to you if you don't get outa my face. Get the picture?"

"I think so," Cass managed.

"Good," Delacruz nodded. "One other thing about this piece of machinery. It locks open automatically—" he jerked the slide back with his left hand, locking it "—when it's empty. See?" His face split in a grin and he dropped back into his chair as the room erupted into a roar of laughter. Cass glanced around, shaken. The other cops were grinning—they'd known all along. Delacruz laid the pistol on the table as an anorexic waitress brought him a fresh beer, bitching him out about the mess on the floor.

"Do you mind?" Cass said, picking up the gun, not waiting for an answer. He touched the magazine release, popping out the clip, then thumbed the slide latch and removed the slide and barrel assembly. "You know about guns, right?" he said. "You must, considering the business you're in." He depressed the spring guide, stripped out the recoil spring. "Did you know the action of your brand-new pistol was designed over a hundred years ago? Guy from Utah named Browning

invented it. I don't know the exact date, but Stan would have. Probably could've told you the patent number." He separated the barrel assembly from the slide.

"Hey," Delacruz said, "what the hell are you doing?"

"Same thing you just did," Cass said, "making a point." The gun was now in a half dozen pieces neatly arranged on the table. "Okay, let's say you're in a tight spot in a dark alley. You fall down, get mud in your piece. Can you field-strip it, clean it, and reassemble it in the dark? Stan could. Machinery talked to him. It was all he was good at, all he really cared about. He was too good to screw up with a damn jack. And he didn't. Which you'd know if you'd made any kind of a competent investigation."

"You've made your point, Novak," Delacruz said. "Now take a walk, okay? After you put that piece back together."

"Nah," Cass said, rising, "a punk like me might blow it. If I were you, I'd get somebody like Stan to fix it for you, so it'll be done right."

"Yeah? You know that alley you mentioned, smartass? I wouldn't take time to clean my gun. No *competent* cop would. I'd just use my backup." He reached down and pulled a fist-sized automatic out of an ankle holster, displaying it on his palm. "You don't have to be a goddamn gunsmith to be a good cop."

"What would you know about being a good cop?" Cass said, turning away.

"Hey, Novak?" Delacruz called, pointing a wobbly index finger at him. "Boom, boom, boom! Gotcha."

"I've never had to cover the death of a friend," Stephanie Hawkins said carefully, avoiding Cass's eyes. "I'm not sure I could." She was behind her desk in her new office in the newsroom the next morning. Nicer than her old one—award plaques on the wall, autographed celebrity 8×10s. She was wearing her navy-blue WVLT anchor blazer and looked even better than Cass remembered. It was the first time they'd been alone together since the split.

"I take it that's your tactful way of saying you think I'm off base?" Cass said.

"I don't know. Look, we're both pros, Novak, let's do this thing by the numbers. One, you think Sliwa was building fast cars—what did you call them?"

"Sleepers."

"Right, sleepers, for the drug trade. And, two, you think he may have been murdered. By who? The dopers?"

"I don't know. Possibly."

"But you said he had enough equipment to build six cars." She checked the notes she'd made as he'd explained. "He'd apparently delivered three and was working on the fourth, correct? So why would they kill him?"

"Maybe to avoid paying him."

"But they'd probably already given him a down payment to buy the equipment, right? So even if they intended to kill him, wouldn't they wait until he'd delivered all six cars to get their money's worth?"

"Maybe it wasn't over money."

"But would your friend have been under the car if someone he distrusted was there, near the jack?"

"No," Cass conceded, "I suppose not."

"All right then, I think we can eliminate the wife, because she apparently cared for the guy even if she was going to leave him. And the boy friend had no motive. Why buy a cow if the milk is free?"

"Very delicately put," Cass sighed.

"Sorry," Hawk said, "but I call 'em like I see 'em. Okay, who's left? The junkie brother-in-law? Again, what motive? Your friend treated him very well."

"Who can say what's in a doper's head?"

"You might be able to make a better guess than most," Hawk said sweetly, "but let's move on. Okay, I'll grant you it bothers me that Bobby Flip dropped out of sight, and it seems awfully convenient that the car disappeared the way it did. But those are just feelings, Cass, and here's a fact. The Warsaw Heights chief of police called the station manager this morning, complaining that you were harassing his officers."

"Maybe he's worried about something."

"Or maybe he's just annoyed. Look, Cass, we've both worked a lot of stations in a lot of towns. Do you really think the Warsaw Heights force is corrupt? That they'd cover up a murder?"

"No," he said slowly, "I guess not."

"Good, neither do I. And, anyway, why would they bother? Their crime rate isn't as high as Detroit's yet, but the way the crack trade's developing out there an unsolved homicide is no big deal. So let's cut to the chase. You asked me what I think—here it is. One, I don't know if your friend was murdered or not, but I'm inclined to agree

with the police that it was an accident. Two, even if it wasn't, I don't see what we can do about it. We're not detectives, we're in TV news and there's nothing to shoot here. What would the pictures be of? An empty garage? A jack? Some boxes of used car parts? Bottom line is, no pictures, no story. I'll tell you what: if the brother-in-law turns up, we can try talking to him on our own time, but that's the best I can do. And that's the news as it looks from here. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Cass sighed. "I asked for your opinion, and the truth is, that's about how I figured it myself. I just needed to hear it from somebody I respect. Helluva thing, isn't it? A guy's life, start to finish, is only worth two minutes of airtime?"

"Or less," Hawk said. "We aren't here to change the world, Novak, just report it. And speaking of reporting, how are you and your new partner getting on?"

"His lips aren't as sweet as yours, darlin', but at least he doesn't snore."

"Good God. What did I ever see in you?"

"A Polish Prince Charming. Wit, charisma."

"That must've been it," she said. "It certainly wasn't your kielbasa, my prince."

"Damn," he winced, rising, "you know, I'd forgotten what a surly bitch you are in the morning. Rest of the day, too, for that matter. I, ah, I miss you."

"I miss you, too," she said. "A lot."

"But not enough?"

She shrugged, a five-page letter in the slightest movement of a shoulder. "Are you going to let this Sliwa thing go?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, "I think so."

And he did.

For the next few weeks, Cass disappeared back into his life, hiding in the whirlwind, an endless reel of crime scenes, fires, strikes, shooting Metcalf talking to stunned victims, witnesses, exhausted firemen, angry strikers. No two days alike, yet as similar as frames on a roll. Same movie, different faces. Motown news.

Then they hit an ugly accident scene just off the Chrysler Freeway. State Police had high-speed-chased a drug suspect from downtown Woodward all the way out into the Heights. Edgy scene—three prowl cars, one with its grill caved in, had the road blocked, gumball lights flashing, police-line tapes strung around. The car they'd chased had skidded broadside into the back of a moving van, smashing up both

vehicles, the two of them welded together like modernist sculpture. A half dozen Early American sofas from the van strewn around the road added to the surreality.

Two state troopers were leading the ashen van driver away from his truck, dazed, shaken. The runner in the car had been thrown out by the impact, was dead or dying on a stretcher on the ground, one EMS attendant giving him mouth-to-mouth, another coolly rigging an IV bottle to the stretcher. Cass filmed them from behind the police tapes, zooming in slowly, gradually tightening the shot, focusing in on the three faces, the desperate urgency of the attendant giving mouth-to-mouth, his buddy's empty expression, knowing it was useless, his eyes as lifeless as the victim's. Good footage, even better when the victim convulsed, breathed on his own for a moment, the two attendants feverishly jacking up the stretcher, rushing it to the EMS van.

Cass filmed them until the doors slammed and the van gunned away, rubber howling, lights and sirens. Somebody jostled him, running, shouting. The truck was on fire, diesel fuel trickling down from the rear tanks, pooling out, flames spreading, panicky gawkers stampeding away from the coming explosion. Novak was getting footage, two state troopers trying to control the blaze with handheld extinguishers, losing the fight, the rear of the van alight now, paint peeling, flames engulfing the car.

The car. A nondescript Chevy junker, rusty, battered. But wearing new rubber. Racing tires. Cass vaulted the police line and sprinted to the car. The hood was sprung half open from the impact. He got his shoulder under it and thrust it farther up, buckling it, metal shrieking. He focused the minicam into the yawning darkness under the hood. Too dim, damn it! He tightened the shot, getting more light from the flicker of the flames. A tricked-out engine, Cyclone headers, Street Dominator manifolds, Holley—

"Get outa here, goddamnit!" one of the troopers screamed at him. "It's goin' up!" Cass ignored him, filming, shifting his position to be sure he got the—

"You crazy sonovabitch!" One of the cops hit him shoulder high, knocking him back. Another grabbed his arms, dragging him away from the car. The Chevy's trunk was engulfed, the fire billowing to a thundering inferno, flames towering into the sky. Cass clutched the camera close, struggling to pull away, stumbling to one knee, then getting flattened, hammered down by the fireblast of heated

air as the car's tank blew with the deep metallic *whoomp* of a naval gun.

Cass staggered to his feet. The cop who'd been dragging him was down, stunned, hat blown off, his face a bloody mask from a gash in his scalp. His buddy was leaning over him, trying to get him up, away from the fire. Cass turned, reeled toward the WVLT mini-van. Caught a glimpse of Delacruz coming on the run, two uniforms with him. Tried to run, but his legs went rubbery and he fell, hitting the gravel hard but protecting the steadycam.

"Get him up!" Delacruz snapped. "Somebody read him his damn rights, he's under arrest!" The two cops hauled him like a sack of potatoes to a Heights patrol car. One of them tried to pull the camera away from him but he folded over it, hanging on with all he had left.

"Leave it," Delacruz said, "just get him in the car!"

They pushed him into the back seat still clutching the camera, slammed the door. He sat up slowly—dazed, deafened, head ringing in the sudden silence. Metcalf was arguing with a stonefaced trooper a few yards away, getting noplacement. Delacruz climbed into the front seat, closed the door, and swiveled to face him.

"You stupid bastard," he said coldly, "you coulda gotten killed, or gotten my people killed. Well, welcome to shit city, Novak, you're in it up to your eyeballs, crossing a police line, reckless endangerment, interfering with officers in the performance, and a whole lot more. You're gonna do some slam time, my friend, maybe a year. How's that grab ya?"

"It was one of Stan's cars," Cass said numbly.

"Think so?" Delacruz said, glancing back at the wreck. "Kinda hard to tell now, almost nothing left of it."

"I got it on film."

"Hope that's a comfort to you in the joint. Give me the camera."

"No."

"You want me to have it taken from you? I can, you know."

"It won't matter," Cass said, blinking, "it won't work. You bust me and I'll be news, Delacruz, heavy press coverage. And I'll talk to anybody who'll listen. You can't cover this up."

"No," Delacruz said, eyeing him, reading the set of his mouth, "maybe I can't. So I guess you'll have to cover it up."

"What are you talking about?"

"You were half right," Delacruz said simply. "Your buddy Sliwa was workin' for dopers, a Jamaican named Johnno, moved his op-

eration into the Heights about six months ago. Bobby Flip traded the car Stan built for him to one of Johnno's people, he liked it, did a deal with Stan for six more—seventy grand in front, fifty more on delivery."

"My God," Cass said.

"Lotta money," Delacruz nodded. "More'n he'd made at the plant in five years. Which is why I was kinda surprised when Sliwa contacted me, told me about the deal, and offered to build a special long-wave beeper into each car so we could track 'em."

"And you went along with it?"

"You're damn right, it was like a gift from God."

"Except that Stan was no good with people, only machinery. And the Jamaican smelled something wrong and stomped him like a cockroach. Damn it, you should have guessed it would happen, you bastard!"

"No, you're wrong. The Jamaican didn't tumble to anything or he wouldn't still be using the cars. And he is. In the last six weeks or so we've tracked down his whole network, plus his contacts in Detroit. Believe me, Johnno doesn't know. Nobody knew but Stan and me. And now you."

"Not Bobby?"

"Get real, Novak, I wouldn't piss on Bobby Flip if he was on fire. I didn't tell him anything, and I doubt like hell that Stan did, either."

"But you don't believe Stan's death was an accident, do you?"

"I honestly don't know yet. Hell, I didn't like the coincidence any better'n you, but everybody checked out. Johnno had no reason to do it, and the wife and her boy friend both have solid alibis."

"But you didn't talk to Bobby, did you?"

"No," Delacruz admitted, "I couldn't. He dropped out of sight right after and I was afraid if we beat the bushes for him we'd spook the Jamaican. Besides, he had no reason to do it. Stan loved the kid, God knows why. Hell, Bobby's the reason he came to me in the first place. After seein' what crack had done to him, he wanted to do something."

"And you let him. And now he's dead. And Bobby's still walking around free as the air."

"For now. But as soon as we bust the Jamaican's ring, I'll find Bobby and lean on him, I give you my word. So how about it, you gonna give me the film?"

"No," Cass said, "no chance."

"But damn it—"

"If Metcalf sees me turn over the film he'll know something's up. I'll keep the film, but I promise not to use it until after you bust the Jamaican. Word of honor."

"All right—" Delacruz nodded slowly "—I guess the word of a guy who's willing to risk burnin' to death for a goddamn picture has to be worth somethin'. But you cross me, Novak, I swear to God I'll stick you in a hole so deep you'll have to phone out for sunshine."

"I believe you. Can I go now?"

"Yeah, get out of here," Delacruz said, hitting the release on the dash, opening the rear door. "Just remember, not a word about this until after you hear from me. And stay the hell out of my way."

"Funny," Cass said, climbing stiffly out, "I don't remember promising that."

A sunny fall afternoon. Cass was wearing a sleeveless MSU sweat-shirt, jeans, tennies, and he was sixteen again. Or could have been. Things hadn't changed much in the Heights. The cars were different, there was a For Lease sign in Woolworth's empty window now, Zerwinski's hardware had gone Ace, but otherwise the street looked much the same as a dozen years ago. When Cass had worked for *Populsku Warsaw Heights*, and most afternoons Ignace Filipiak would be in the window booth of Klima's Coffee Shop.

"Kazu, *jak sie mas*," the old man said, his face lighting up like a winter sunrise, "sit, sit. Zosia, bring *kawa* for my young friend. You want some *babka* rolls, Kazu? Fresh made this morning?"

"No, thank you, coffee will be fine. How are you, Mr. Filipiak?"

"How am I? I sit in the sun in a room breathing the scent of *chelba* bread baking, a well fed woman to bring coffee, a friend stops by to talk. Heaven will be many fine days like this."

"I doubt I'll ever find out," Cass said.

"Nor I," the old man smiled. "So, what business brings you home, Kazu?"

"Business?" Cass said, accepting a mug of steaming coffee from a large, bell-shaped woman.

"Kazu, my legs are bent, not my head. I'm here almost every day since you left, so I know you didn't come just to see me. It's okay, we'll talk, have coffee, but first the business, so I don't sour the cream wondering."

"You haven't changed a damn bit, Ignace, you know that?"

"You have. You're more polite now, and your eyesight's failing. So, how can I help you?"

"I, ah, I need to get in touch with Bobby. Do you know where he is?"

"I can probably guess," the old man nodded, "but I'm not sure I should tell you. He is hiding, Kazu, seeing ghosts. He has one of Stanley's guns. He's very dangerous now."

"It's important."

"To you, maybe, Kazu, but nothing is important to Bobby but the cocaine. There's nothing left of him. He's lost, a victim of the *holjeda*, the plague. He still walks, but he's dead. If you talk to him, only the drug will answer."

"I still need to see him."

The old man looked away, idly stirring his coffee. "Tell me, Kazu, why you want to see Bobby. Does this have to do with your work on the TV?"

"Yes, sir, in a way."

Filipiak glanced at him curiously, then shrugged. "You've changed more than I thought. You never used to lie to me, Kazu Novak. You shouldn't try. You have no talent for it. It only makes me wonder what you're trying to hide. And I think it must be that you've learned about Bobby and Stanley and those damned cars. Is that it?"

"You know about it?"

"I still have the newspaper, Kazu. People talk to me. And I'm not blind, just old. Do you think my son and my son-in-law could hide such a thing from me? Let it be, please. Sonya is all that matters now. If it comes out what her husband was doing—" The old man seized Novak's wrist with a palsied hand. His grip had no more strength than a child's, but his eyes were alight, like staring into a flame. "Let it go, Kazu. Stanley is dead. Bobby and I will join him in hell soon and it will be over—for us and for Sonya, too."

"What do you mean you'll join Stanley in hell? Why? Why should you?"

"It isn't the gun that makes Bobby dangerous, Kazu, it's the *holjeda*. The evil is contagious. Bobby's heart is long dead. But Stanley. To know what happened to my son, then to work for the *psiakref* dogs who poisoned him for *money*! He was even worse than the animals who sell the drugs. He sold his soul. But he paid for it. I hope the bastard is still paying."

"My God, Mr. Filipiak—Stanley?"

"Not the Stanley you knew, Kazu. He was contaminated by the *holjeda*. I did what I had to do. God forgive me, I would do it again."

Cass couldn't speak, could barely breathe, a fist clamped around

his heart so tightly he thought he would die. He slid out of the booth and stood staring down at the old man. He seemed so much smaller than he remembered, and he realized he was shrinking, receding, fading to black-and-white. To a still life, an old man dreaming in the afternoon sun. He tried to think of something to say. Nothing came. Mr. Filipiak was a man people talk to. He would learn soon enough.

Outside, the street had changed, too. It wasn't a dozen years ago. The haze had burned away. A few blocks down, a kid was lounging on a corner, scouting traffic, open for business. Bobby? Too far away to tell. Then his eyes misted and he couldn't see the boy any more. He walked to his van, groped blindly under the dash, and pulled out a small cellophane baggie. Five joints. A hundred and fifty bucks' worth. He tore them to pieces and threw them in the gutter. It didn't help. It didn't help a damn bit.

It's true. You can't ever go home again. But sweet Jesus, you can never truly leave it behind, either.

The old man blinked up at him as he slid back into the booth.

"I didn't finish my coffee," Cass said, "and we never did talk about the old times."

"No," the old man said, "we didn't."



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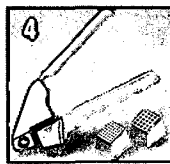
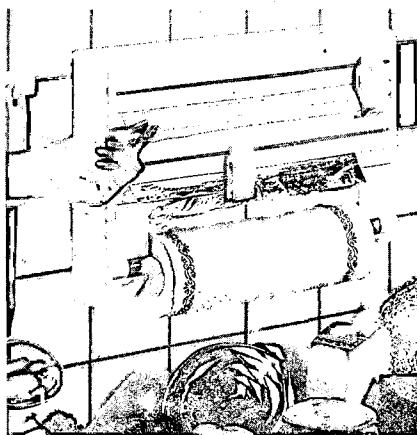
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▼ PERFECT KITCHEN ROLL DISPENSER AND 3 PIECE KITCHEN TOOL KIT

Do kitchen wraps have you all thumbs? Then THE Perfect Kitchen Dispenser is for you. It's the only one that, cut after cut, holds the roll end ready to be picked up and pulled out for the next sheet. The two "neat sheet" cutters feature stainless steel blades for cutting that's a cinch. Holds standard rolls of cling-film, aluminum foil, or wax paper plus a paper towel holder. Simple front loading procedure makes replacement a snap. Sleek white and grey design fits any decor. But there's more: it comes with state of the art hand-can opener, super strong jar and bottle opener, and impressive garlic/onion press with 2 inserts for fine and coarse pressing. So get a handle on kitchen wraps and treat yourself.

\$69.98 (\$8.50) #A1954.

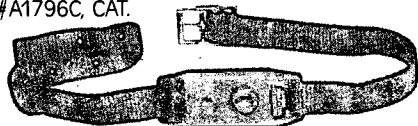


1. DISPENSER
2. HAND CAN OPENER
3. JAR AND BOTTLE OPENER
4. GARLIC/ONION PRESS

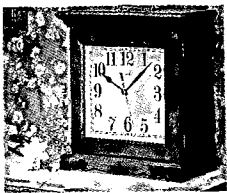
▼ DO FLEAS HAVE EARS?

The Microtech Flea Collar with its blasts of ultrasound creates such an intolerable environment that fleas and ticks abandon their pet hosts within 5 days. It is designed specifically for fleas and focuses on a 4' zone of protection, the Microtech Collar outperforms other kinds of ultrasonic pest chasers. A vast improvement over poison powders and chemical collars. Works on cats or dogs. Adjustable 19" collar fits 97% of dogs and runs for 6-8 months on 2 lithium cells (included). You can afford to see if it *really* works because you are fully protected by our guarantee — you have nothing to lose but the fleas!

\$44.98 (\$3.00) #A1796, DOG, **\$44.98** (\$3.00) #A1796C, CAT.

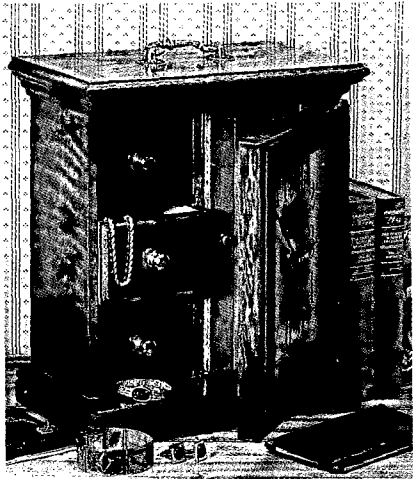


▼ A TIMELY SECRET

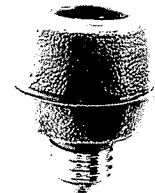


Do you have valuables or other important items that need a secure and secret hiding place? Why not store them in an elegant 17th

century reproduction of a mantelpiece clock! Handcrafted in cherry, and accented with solid brass, the clock has large antique style numbers and features a quartz powered movement. This lovely accent piece measures 13" (h) x 11¾" (w) x 6½" (d) and will grace any dresser, desk or mantel. The clock face opens to reveal 3 fabric lined drawers and a larger (10" x 4" x 3¾"), compartment, complete with key. Beauty and security in one lovely piece—what a timely idea! **\$99.98** (\$8.00) #A1917.



▼ TEACH AN OLD LAMP NEW TRICKS

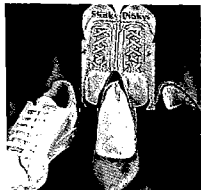


Any lamp that takes a standard bulb can be updated with the Touchtronic dimmer. No rewiring needed—just screw into lamp socket. Then your touch on any metal part becomes the "switch"—touch once for low light, again for medium, a third time for full wattage. Handy when you're entering a dark room, great at bedside and a real comfort to the arthritic or the ill. You'll save time, money and electricity—no

more 3-way bulbs to buy and you pay for only as much light as you need. U.L. listed; one-year factory warranty. **\$15.98** (\$4.00) #A1700. 2 for **\$27.98** (\$6.00) #A17002.



▼ FRESHENED FOOTWEAR



Just put a Stinky Pinky "sock" in each shoe and overnight odor is gone, absorbed by the special blend of all natural earth materials. Works in running shoes, sneakers, boots, leather shoes, anything that goes on your feet. And keeps on working, too—just put Stinky Pinkys out in the sun for a day every three months or so to restore their odor-catching ability. Three pairs of Stinky Pinkys, enough for 6 shoes or boots, costs **\$19.98** (\$4.00) #13263.

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▼ GOURMET POPCORN POPPER



All new high temperature 6 qt. popcorn popper. Most electric and hot-air poppers "puff" the corn more than they "pop" it, leaving it tough with hard centers. This flat-bottomed stove-top popper reaches 475° and pops full in two minutes with 6 quarts of the best popcorn you ever tasted. Stirring paddle with through-the-crank handle virtually eliminates burnt or unpopped kernels. Wooden handle for safe grip, two dump lids. Pop without oil for delicious diet popcorn. 370 calories per 4 qt. bowl. Produce tender, fluffy, old fashioned movie theater popcorn with the Detonator™ popper. Made in the USA. **\$24.98** (\$5.00) #A1950.

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▼ FOR THE BIRDS

A super feeding system that really is "for the birds". The Meta Wild Bird Feeder™ has a unique tri-level perch design that encourages different species to feed together. It is easy to fill and provides a total of 30 inches of feeding space and holds 2½ quarts of seed in six individual feeding stations, so different seed mixes can be used to attract different species of birds. The feeder features 2-way optical quality mirror panels that lets you watch from just inches away, while the birds feed undisturbed. Constructed of durable and attractive Lexan®, the feeder is easy to clean, even in the dishwasher. The Meta Feeder™ measures 26"x14"x5", comes fully assembled and mounts easily to any window. Plus, it comes with a lifetime warranty! So, get in on the biggest hobby in the US and "feed the birds". **\$79.98** (\$10.00) #A1946.

